

Mesquite Jenkins,
Tumbleweed



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By

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CHAPTER I

THE LAZY S had been a good ranch to work for, and he had left it in much better condition than he had found it. It now provided an ideal job for any lazy foreman. It was paying well, too. A movement on his right caught his eye: it was only a tumbleweed, skidding down a lane in the sage.

Mrs. Tobe Ricketts, the widowed owner of the Lazy S, had let him have his own way; had let him do what he wanted to do when he wanted to do it, and she had been more like a mother to him than an employer. He had found the ranch on the thin and brittle edge of bankruptcy, old Tobe murdered along the trail. It had been none of his business, but he

had been foolish enough to go to the funeral, and the helpless old woman had aroused his sympathy. Well, he had cured the ranch of its ills, become its foreman at a salary which should have satisfied any young man holding down his first job of responsibility; indeed, he had protested that he was being overpaid, and had been promptly and properly squelched by the fierce old woman, whose fierceness was even less than skin deep.

As he rode along, Mesquite turned these things over in his mind, having nothing else to think about, unless it might be the eternal question of drinking water. Both he and the horse would be better off for a drink.

He had felt fettered, back there on the Lazy S. Riding the open range, foreman of a good ranch, accountable to no one but himself, since that was the way Mrs. Ricketts wanted things to be, he had felt fettered! No matter how long the picket rope might be, no matter how far out of sight the pin was located, nevertheless they both had existed. And when he had broken his journey to get himself mixed up in the various troubles of the Lazy S, he had been on his way to visit his friend Johnny Nelson. Now he was starting on again, and this time he would keep on riding until he reached that deferred destination.

His mind, having idly run back over the material factors connected with the troubles of the Lazy S, now began to direct its inquiry into more subtle things. Everything about the ranch had suited him and he had felt a particularly strong affection for its owner. He had good friends in town, too. Money? More than he had any use for. And what was money? Just something to be translated into something else; something which had to be translated before it had any real value. One hundred dollars a month, and keep, in the days when a dollar was a dollar, and when a

good foreman of a ranch of that size should have been content with something over half that much. In that country, at that time, the translation of money was limited: gambling, liquor, courting some woman. Unlike most of his friends, his gambling was confined to a harmless game where a man bought a hundred matches for a dollar and then made desperate efforts to add to them. It was not, for him, an ideal way of killing time.

Liquor: he did not care for the taste of it, so why pretend? His ideas concerning liquor had been shaped by his environment, and he had no fault to find with it; but he so much preferred other drinks when he wanted to tickle his palate that he did not bother with it. He was not the kind of a man who felt that it was necessary to do as others did, or to do anything, without good cause, that he did not want to do.

Women. He chuckled. If he had felt fettered by an invisible picket rope much longer than any journey that he might wish to make; by a picket pin so far away that he could not see it—if he had felt shackled by his late job, then how much more would he feel shackles if they were always present, waking or sleeping? Women? Not for him! The very idea of women prodded a sleeping anger, and then he felt a little guilty and swiftly excepted Mrs. Ricketts. She was like his own mother, and her age was somewhere between sixty and the uttermost high limit.

His feeling of guilt reached out and embraced another consideration, found that it was baseless, and left a smile on his face. She did not need him any more than a person needed a doctor after he had gotten well. The ranch was running itself now, and the man he had put into his old job was a good man, and cost her forty dollars a month less. The cycle of honesty was in its upward swing on and around the

Lazy S, and gunmen were now purely ornamental in that whole wide section of country. He had done a good job and the country was clean again. On his return journey, if he chanced to ride this way, he would stop off at the Lazy S and look things over for a few days.

A tumbleweed suddenly popped up over the top of a little rise in front of him and bounced on before the gust of wind. His horse had known tumbleweeds all its ornery life, but now took occasion to become frightened, and for the moment exhibited a mean spirit, accentuated, perhaps, by a mounting thirst. Mesquite promptly called the bluff without taking his gaze from the weed rolling over the desert floor. He, too, had known tumbleweeds all his life; but not until this moment had they ever had any particular significance for him. They had just been dead weeds, rolling.

"You shouldn't get all riled up about a tumbleweed," he said to the horse, and then grinned. "Reckon mebbe I'm somethin' of a tumbleweed myself. Huh," he grunted thoughtfully, and rode on with a new idea to wrangle with. It was funny what thoughts would come into a man's head when he was riding; and a man always had time to trace them out, backwards and frontwards, and to follow them through.

A wagon track angled down a slope, joined the trail, and ran along it. Wagon tracks came from some place and went to some place. A movement far off to the left caught his attention. It was a cow. His roving glance picked up three more, and for an instant the slouch went out of his posture, but quickly returned. He had nothing to do with cows, now. Somewhere in the vicinity, however, there was a ranch or a grazing crew. That meant water. Perhaps when he got to the top of that high rise he would catch sight of one or the other. At the thought his thirst quickened, and he now risked

the pleasure of a cigarette, since water appeared to be within reach. He hadn't had a smoke for several hours; well, that was all right: a smoke tasted better the longer a man waited.

More cows. The top of the rise came nearer, and then he looked over it. Yep: there it was. The squat, 'dobe buildings seemed to have been dropped carelessly without plan. Flyspecks on an ocean of sage. 'Dobe corral, too: huh, somebody had taken an interest in the layout. There was the bunkhouse, and if he was any judge that square box of mud would be the blacksmith shop. Since the towns began to crowd the range, some of the new ranches were not building blacksmith shops. Well, this had been a real ranch at some time: there was a sloping tire stone, with the regular hole for the hub. It looked like that, anyhow, from where he was.

He dropped down the farther slope at much better speed. The horse was nobody's fool, and it was thirsty. He thought he had seen Thunder testing the wind, back there aways: that was what really had put his own thoughts on water. A horse always knew. He followed a smaller trail which branched off from the main track, passed the corral, several small buildings, and drew up at the kitchen door, for a moment frowning suspiciously at a well-tended flower garden at the base of the rear wall. Rancher's wife, perhaps; or his mother. Well, anyhow, it didn't mean anything to him.

He was halfway to the ground when the door opened and he looked over his shoulder at the sound. He was not surprised, because the flower garden had prepared him; and just because she was pretty as hell was no reason for a man- What was it she had said? He did not have to ask. She repeated her words, with added suspicion and a deepened frown:

“What do you want?”

“Water,” he grunted, his own frown matching hers.

“Who are you?” she demanded sharply. She had a nice voice if she’d give it a*ny kind of a chance.

Wasn’t she suspicious, though? All right: she’d get as good as she gave. Memory flashed him a little picture.

“Tumbleweed,” he said, very shortly. He had just made a discovery. Eyelashes were right pretty.

“Of all the absurd countries-” she said, checked herself, and let out another notch of the frown. She had thought that all cowpunchers had yellow teeth.

“Who *are* you?” she demanded again.

“Reckon we’re not thirsty, me an’ th’ hoss,” he said, turning to swing back into the saddle. He moved as smoothly as a cat, and as lightly. “I’ll admit, though, that this country is absurd, an’ gettin’ absurder all th’ time. Good-day, ma’am.”

She colored, the frown shifted, turned itself inside out and became a smile, although not too much of a smile. Her suspicions, however, had not been fully routed.

“I wouldn’t think of letting a horse stay thirsty,” she said. “There’s a trough, down by the corral.” She glanced up at an olla hanging under the porch roof, and nodded at it. “And an olla for you,” she added.

“Thanks,” said Mesquite, shortly. “Th’ *hoss* is thirsty.”

“Oh! We—my brother and I—we have been— well, I really do not care *who* you are!” There was a pinwheel of skirts and

the door slammed shut. Was that a bar falling in place?

Mesquite gently scratched his head and grinned at the planks.

“Name’s Jenkins, Mesquite Jenkins. Th’ hoss is named Thunder. We’re just ridin’ through, an’ more rapid now than ever.”

He let his pride sag a little and strode to the olla, drank deeply, carefully hung the vessel up again, and went back to the horse. The water had been cold and sweet. As he rode toward the corral trough the thought persisted: cold and sweet! Huh, the country *was* getting absurd. It was not long before he was on his way again in search of the nearest town, there to spend the night; and, true to his word, he was riding more rapidly now than ever. Flower beds!

Five miles had slipped behind him when he put some of his thoughts into words and spoke to the horse.

“Anybody would-a reckoned I’d stepped on her pet cat!” he growled, and went back to his thoughts. An hour or so later he saw the town on the rim of the horizon and nodded with satisfaction. Cold and sweet: yeah; but the *water* had held a trace of gypsum. Thunder was thinking about food, and quickened his pace. The rider smiled and gave the horse its head.

CHAPTER II

IT WAS NOT A TOWN, not a village, hardly even a hamlet. There were two stores. The first sold merchandise, and although it was hardly midafternoon, it was closed and locked. Mesquite could see that without leaving the saddle, for the padlock on the front door was large enough to be seen at ten times the distance. The windows were grimy and filled with dust-

covered merchandise, ranging from canned goods, needles and thread, to picks and shovels and firearms.

Mesquite kept on without pausing, and a moment later he dismounted before the second building, thinking that if there was no bed available a man always had his blankets for covering, his saddle for a pillow and, if the ground was cold or damp, his hat to go under his hips. Several horses stood at the tie-rail, and Mesquite dismounted and put Thunder with them.

He pushed back the partly opened door, conscious that a heated argument was going on inside, stepped into the room, and instantly took one step sideways, and put his back against the wall, his eyes slowly adjusting themselves to the poorer light.

The quarrel flared high, swiftly climbing on trivial differences: light fuel blazes swiftest. The two men were standing on each side of the table, the onlookers as tense as the principals, alert and careful to keep out of the probable course of bullets in case it were going that far; and to their way of thinking it was going that far. Jed Peters seldom took so much care in the picking of his fights as he was taking in this one.

The disagreement was forced on one side, and seemingly reluctantly followed on the other in an obvious effort toward the saving of face: pride and courage insisted on that much. Cards had nothing to do with it, for no cards were in sight; and the stranger was at a loss to understand the reason for it, at loss for a moment; and then the trend of the differences began to become plain to him. Reduced to its essentials, the tall man wanted a fight and was forcing the pace, his veiled insults steadily becoming less veiled. Fierce eagerness blazed in his eyes, in strong contrast with the

more or less bewildered look in those of the other man; but gradually the bewilderment faded as Jed Peters' purpose began to become plain; and the look on the face of the shorter man grew desperate and hopeless; and then a sudden, unheeding gust of rage swept over him. Ridden, goaded, spurred out of his mental equilibrium, the shorter man threw back his head and glared through defiant eyes at the other. He was an old man, and perhaps he failed to realize what the passing of the years had done to his youthful prowess; how much age had slowed him, had interfered with nice coordination; or perhaps he had reached a point where he did not much care.

"Yo're a liar!" he snapped, rage sweeping the last vestige of caution away, and him with it across the threshold of death.

The shot roared deafeningly, masking the crash of the overturned table. It persisted in the ears of the little crowd for moments after the sound itself had ceased. The spreading cloud of powder smoke revealed a figure sprawled grotesquely on the grimy, hard-packed clay floor; a tense group of staring onlookers in rigid immobility; and the killer poised for another shot if it were needed. For a moment he stood thus, his gun gently smoking, looking down upon his work with a sneer. Then he looked up and faced the crowd, defiant, secure, and challenging.

"You all heard him!" he snarled, his eyes mere slits of defiance. "You all heard what he called me, an' you all saw him go for his gun. That's right, ain't it?"

Reluctant and grudging nods of affirmation answered him as his slowly turning head shifted his cold eyes from face to face. One man squirmed a little and cleared his throat as if to speak; but changed his mind quickly as the killer's gaze reached and settled upon him. It meant death to do

otherwise. The slowly turning head kept on and the cold eyes took in the bartender, who thereupon gulped and nodded, and hated himself for doing both; and then, on around the circle, the killer's gaze stopped and rested on the erect figure of the youthful stranger, and he gave this person his full attention. He had long since weighed the characters of the others in the room, but this stranger was an unknown quantity. Peters was shoving the gun back into its holster as he became aware, suddenly, that there was no affirmation in the stranger's face, no answering nod, but only a cold, contemptuous and challenging hostility in the frosty eyes, eyes that seemed to have no depth. A little prickle ran along the killer's spine, but he gave no thought to this instinctive warning in the renewed tenseness of the situation.

"Well?" snarled the killer, checking the downward motion of the gun before it had dropped into the sheath. "*You* saw it, didn't you?"

Mesquite nodded frigidly, instantly cataloguing this man. He had met this type before.

"Yeah," he drawled with insulting slowness. "*I* saw it."

"Well?" persisted the killer, his grip tightening on the handles of the gun. This kid might need a lesson.

"Well, what?" asked the stranger, his inflection like a slap in the face.

Jed Peters reddened suddenly. A zigzag vein on his forehead swelled and pulsed as measure of his anger. For a moment the two men weighed each other, and a slight sneer crept around the corners of the killer's mouth.

"You saw him go for his gun, didn't you," demanded Jed, the question really a statement.

"No," answered the stranger without particular emphasis. He was watching Jed's eyes, as he had been taught to do.

"You didn't?" snapped the killer, through set teeth, the zigzag vein contorting with renewed energy.

"No, I didn't."

"You better change yore mind, stranger!" warned Jed, now balanced on the balls of his feet.

"You claimin' he reached for his gun?" calmly asked the stranger.

"Yes! An' he did!" snapped Jed.

"Which only proves he was right when he called you a liar," stated Mesquite casually.

Again the crowd shrunk, again there came the blur of action, again a gun roared in the room and powder smoke spread out, thinning quickly in a sudden draught. The killer, crouched over in pain, was holding his gun hand tightly against his body, and through the fingers of the left hand there slowly came a thin trickle of blood. His gun was on the floor, halfway across the room, but he had no eyes for it: they were riveted on the youth against the wall.

"I could just as easy a-killed you," said Mesquite, his hands empty again and hooked by their thumbs to the tops of the slanting gun belts. "An' I will, th' next time you make a play ag'in me. Pick up yore gun, git out, an' stay out while I'm in town."

The silence was electric while the killer slowly picked up the gun. It was a momentous instant, despite the handicap of a left hand for gunplay. A sudden decision, the swift bending of the wrist, the twitch of a finger: the decision was not made, the wrist did not bend; but even so, anything was possible until the killer got out of sight and range; and as he stepped through the door, out of sight of the crowd, Mesquite swiftly shifted position. It was a needless precaution. Seconds trickled into the past in deep silence, and then a gusty exhalation ended it.

“Phew!” breathed the bartender, his eyes on a level with the top of the counter. He slowly arose to his full height, staring at the quiet stranger again leaning carelessly against the wall. “Phew! Jed reached for *his* gun, all right!”

“Th’ damn’ murderer had it in his hand all th’ time!” exulted the spectator who had hesitated in the giving of his previous testimony. “He hadn’t let loose of it! Damn’ shame he wasn’t killed! Stranger, I never saw a purtier draw. I’m right proud to meet you; but shore as hell you plumb wasted that shot.”

“You never *saw* a purtier draw? *Saw?*” shouted a companion in somewhat hysterical scorn. “You never *saw* nothin’, ’less it was powder smoke. I’m admittin’ I never *heard* a finer shot, by Godfrey! Stranger, th’ town is yourn!”

Mesquite stood quietly against the wall, weighing the crowd, keeping the end windows and door under observation. He had not yet heard the sounds of a departing horse. He smiled thinly, a cold smile.

“Don’t reckon I want yore town,” he said, and then listened to the sound of hoofbeats outside, which steadily grew less in volume. In a moment he caught sight of Jed Peters

through a grimy window, and Jed was riding hard along the north trail out of town.

“Everybody up! It’s on th’ house!” called the bartender, waving both hands. He looked smilingly at the stranger, and abruptly laughed. “Come ahead, friend. You ain’t got an enemy in th’ town, an’ Jed Peters ain’t lookin’ for no more victims to-day. Step up with th’ boys.” He blew a gusty breath. “Line up with us. We want to drink to that draw. I never did see nothin’ like that before.”

“All right; but make mine a cigar,” said Mesquite, slowly moving forward. He exchanged grins with the line-up, and swung his foot on to the rail.

“Reckon we better take this chance we got for festivities,” said one of the group. “Trouble shore is goin’ to bust loose in this town before th’ sun comes up ag’in.”

Growls of assent endorsed the gloomy prophecy, and Mesquite turned his head slowly and looked inquiringly at the speaker.

“Big John will be in here with his tail up, an’ all his boys with him,” said the man at the end of the line. “Yes, sir; he will!”

“Big John?” inquired the stranger in mild curiosity. “An’ who’s he?”

“Friend, you shore are a stranger hereabouts,” said the nearest man, the glass stopped halfway from his lips. “If you ain’t miles away from here when Big John an’ his boys come ridin’ in, you’ll shore learn all about him—an’ them. They’re bad medicine.”

Assenting growls ran along the line-up and back again.

“But I figgered on stayin’ overnight, seein’ as I’ve rode more than forty miles since sun-up,” replied Mesquite thoughtfully. He put a match to the cigar, and after a moment of gingerly suction, looked along the line-up. “An’,” he said, calmly, “that’s just what I’m goin’ to do.”

The bartender stood up on his toes to peer over the counter at what lay on the floor against the overturned table. He shook his head and frowned.

“Some of you boys tote him into th’ back room,” he suggested, and sighed with relief as the request was complied with. Somebody put the table back on its four legs, and another brought in a shovelful of sand from the street and scattered it judiciously on the floor. As the men returned from the back room, the man behind the counter nodded his thanks and again faced the quiet stranger.

“Friend,” he said with great earnestness, crowding against the edge of the bar, “you keep right on a-ridin’. If you can put another forty mile on top of th’ first forty before you stop, then you’ll be doin’ yoreself a great favor. Take a good drink, get on yore hoss, an’ travel !”

“I don’t like liquor, much; an’ I think too much of my hoss,” replied Mesquite, shaking his head. “His father was blooded stock, an’ had a record, back in Kentucky. He’s earned his rest an’ his feed, an’ he’s goin’ to get both. Where can I find me a bed for th’ night?”

“Boot Hill, mebby,” growled a pessimistic member of the crowd.

Grunts of affirmation endorsed the statement.

The bartender was frowning and slowly shaking his head. He liked this young man, even if he did show signs of stubborn

foolhardiness.

"You better hurt th' feelin's of a hoss than to git yoreself killed," he said, slowly. "A hoss is a right noble animal, but hell, he ain't *that* noble!"

"He's done a day's work. Where can I get a bed for th' night?" persisted the stranger, smiling.

The bartender sighed, closely scrutinized the person of the stranger, and made a sudden and generous decision.

"They'll hunt you out wherever you go," he said, gloomily. "You look like you ain't got no critters on you: you can sleep with me. Mebby they won't think of that. We'll hide yore hoss, make a lot of misleadin' tracks, an' let 'em reckon you rode on. These boys, here, will keep their mouths shut, or mebby open 'em to tell some harmless lies."

"An' you'll get in trouble for it," said Mesquite, warming slightly to this knight of the bottle. He shook his head reprovingly. "I'm figgerin' on stayin' where other strangers stay. Folks get th' wrong idear, sometimes, when a man holes up."

"Well, you shore know yore own business best, friend," spoke up the man at the far end of the line; "but I'm figgerin' you've got more nerve than sense." He was leaning far over the counter, craning his neck to see the man to whom he was speaking. "I reckon mebby you better tell us yore name in case we have to put up a headboard." He cackled at his own grim humor, but he was hopefully listening, being a curious soul.

"An' who to write to," suggested a companion in sober earnestness.

Mesquite smiled pleasantly, and nodded.

“Well,” he said, slowly, “you can call me—eh, Mesquite. If it comes to anythin’ as serious as headboards, there’s a letter in my pocket with my name on the envelope ; an’ th’ letter, inside, will tell you who wrote it, an’ where he is. I’ll have a cigar on my round. If trouble’s headin’ my way, a cigar is a lot better than liquor.”

“Yeah, it is; an’ trouble is shore headin’ for you, with her tail plumb standin’ up an’ her ears laid back. Shore as hell an’ high water, she is,” said the man behind the counter. He dragged a moist rag over the smooth top. “You’ve made a fool outa th’ worst murderin’ bully in this hull country. He’s got to save his face, like old Fred had to. Him an’ his friends won’t let *that* deal pass.”

“Uh-huh,” grunted Mesquite. “He shouldn’t a-shot that old man down, like he did. I’m sorry that I didn’t cut loose before it got that far, whether I had any business to or not. Who was he?”

“His name was Fred, an’ he was foreman *an’* outfit of th’ Three J,” said the bartender. “Good, square, all-’round feller, he was. His boss don’t know nothin’ about ranchin’. Old Fred was makin’ a fair go of th’ Three J, in spite of Big John an’ his outfit; but what’ll happen to th’ Three J now, I shore don’t know. Looks like th’ killin’ of Fred was a kinda openin’ move to somethin’.”

No one else in the room offered any information, and Mesquite sensed the reasons for their silence. The first flush of excitement being over, the crowd was giving thought to self-preservation. Besides, the stranger was just a stranger riding through, and information about local affairs was of no real value to him. He was just a tumbleweed, rolling on.

Before anything else could be said the sounds of hoofbeats, growing rapidly nearer and louder, broke the silence.

The crowd seemed to shrink, pressing against the bar, but otherwise not moving. They were somewhat reassured when they realized that the sounds had been made by a single horse. Mesquite stepped away from them and swung around to face the open door, and as he did so a sigh of relief ran along the line-up, and tense expressions became normal.

The man behind the counter glanced at Mesquite and nodded.

"It's all right, Mesquite," he said. "Th' Three J has come to town."

Through the door there stepped a dust-covered man, his questing eyes sweeping the crowd and the room, and then rested on the man behind the counter.

"Hello, Tim," said the newcomer. "Hello, boys; howdy, stranger. I'm looking for Fred. Don't seem to be able to find him. Have you boys seen him?"

Tim cleared his throat, glanced helplessly around, and looked at Mesquite. He cleared his throat again, glancing from Mesquite to the newcomer.

"Mesquite," he said nervously and hurriedly, "meet up with John Jordan, owner of th' Three J. Jordan, this here is Mesquite."

Jordan could not see the sense for such an abrupt, uncalled-for, and hasty introduction to someone for whom he cared nothing; but, recalling other things peculiar to this part of the country, he smiled broadly and nodded. He found no fault with the friendly customs of this Western country, and

to prove it he held out his hand and stepped forward to meet the stranger, idly wondering why everyone's face seemed to be so glum.

"Glad to meet you, Mesquite," he said. "If you chance to get out my way, drop in and we'll empty a glass."

"Much obliged, Jordan," replied Mesquite. "I'll do that, if I'm out yore way."

Jordan nodded cheerfully and again turned toward the bar, ill-at-ease in this strange atmosphere.

"Fred hasn't been in here, eh?" he asked, and then smiled knowingly. "Or perhaps, from your awkward change of the subject, he's drunk again? That it?"

"No," answered the bartender with top-heavy casualness. "No, that ain't it. He ain't drunk, an' he ain't been drunk lately, far's I know." He turned to his companions for help and received none. "Wasn't nowhere near drunk, was he, boys?" The hesitant negatives made him shake his head, and he looked at the door of the back room. "comin' right down to cases, Jordan, he ain't drunk, an' he won't never git drunk no more."

The room was very quiet, except for the soft shuffling of sole leather on the hard-packed earth; and the ranchman sensed that something was very, very wrong. His gaze slowly passed over the faces of the crowd and came to rest on the face of the bartender.

"You mean—what?" he quietly asked.

"I mean what I just said. Fred's dead," sighed the bartender, mopping off a dry counter. "Dead," he repeated, flatly.

“Dead!” echoed the ranchman, almost under his breath. The word was like a slap in the face. “Why— I can’t believe it! Fred—is—dead.” He sighed. “Damn it all: life is full of rotten surprises. He was— killed—of course?”

“Yeah: killed,” said Tim, and a sudden ruddiness crept up from his collar and spread over his face.

“Who did it?” asked the ranch owner, calmly.

“Jed Peters,” said a voice from the line-up, sounding loud in the peculiar silence of the room.

“That damned blackleg! H’m.” Jordan was silent for a moment, his eyes reading those of his companions. He nodded thoughtfully, as if in answer to an unspoken question. “How did it happen?”

“Gun fight,” said another voice, hesitantly.

“Of course; but *how* did it happen?” persisted Jordan.

There were no replies to this question, and the ranchman shook his head hopelessly, not blaming anyone for being reticent; but in that reticence he read that the trouble had not been just a gun fight—not an even break. Considering Fred’s age, and Jed Peters’s prowess and reputation, it could not have been an even break even at the best.

Mesquite stepped back toward the line-up, and the ranchman glanced at him. For a moment he regarded the stranger in silence, and took his cue from a sudden glint in the cold, blue eyes.

“You see it, Mesquite?” he asked.

"Yeah, Jordan. Yore foreman was just plain murdered," replied the stranger without particular emphasis.

"I was beginning to suspect it," confessed the ranchman. "How did it happen?"

"That Peters feller picked a fight with him an' killed him before he had a chance to make his play," explained Mesquite, slowly. "I saw th' whole thing."

"You saw it all?" demanded Jordan. His tone made the words an accusation.

"All th' action, yeah."

"And you made no effort to stop it?" asked the ranchman, with the first trace of anger he had shown.

"Yore man called him a liar, friend; an' out in this country that's a fightin' word. I had no call to cut in. Not none."

"But you just said it was murder!"

"Looked that way when it was *over*. Yore man didn't make th' play that he should-a made, an' that Peters could claim he expected him to make when he

called him a liar. Fred should-a drawn with th' words, like a man would expect him to. If it wasn't for that I'd a-killed Peters, instead of just shootin' th' gun outa his hand."

"You—what's that?" asked Jordan, doubting his ears.

"I said I would-a killed him, instead of just shootin' th' gun outa his hand," repeated Mesquite quietly and evenly.

"*You* shot *Peters'* gun out of his hand?" incredulously demanded the ranchman, glancing around the room for a

solution to this apparent mistake. Eager nods met his eyes, and he again turned to the stranger, looking him over as if he were some strange animal. “H’m! You want a job? A *good* job?” he asked.

Mesquite smiled gently, shaking his head slowly.

“I just quit a better one,” he answered.

“A good job,” repeated Jordan earnestly. His voice had a ring in it that it had lacked before. “One-man outfit of the Three J, at two hundred dollars a month and keep!” Rage was beginning to edge his words, to sway his judgment; rage and a swiftly mounting revenge. Fred, honest old Fred, shot down like a dog! By God, he’d bring Peters to the end of his rope!

There was a sound like the quick sucking of breaths along the interested line-up: two hundred a month was unheard-of. Then the true meaning of the offer began to become apparent, and all eyes watched the stranger, watched him eagerly, hopefully.

Mesquite was looking steadily at the ranchman, cold eyes reading hot and angry ones. He shook his head.

“That’s killer pay,” he said quietly. “I’m not a killer, Jordan.”

The ranchman’s expression changed swiftly, and he nodded, feeling guilty.

“Sorry, stranger. I didn’t mean it just exactly that way, although that idea was the basis of my thoughts. It was not just so much killing in protection of my property, as paying up for old Fred. He was a—white man. We were friends rather than owner and foreman. I’m sorry, and I’m quite certain

that I meant no offense. I just boiled over, as it were. You understand?"

"I get yore drift, I reckon," replied Mesquite thoughtfully. "I'm headin' along east to visit an old friend. I ain't lookin' for work. Don't need or want work. I started on this visit a year ago, found a dead man a little way off th' trail—he was murdered, too —an' I've only just got goin' ag'in. I'm figgerin' to keep on goin'." His slow, appraising gaze had been passing over the ranchman. "You ain't a Westerner," he observed.

"That's a mistake I've been trying to overcome. I heard that there was money in ranching: God knows there was none in the business I was in. My father came from the West, and talked a lot about it. I fed on it as a child. Well, I guess that I'm licked again; but, by God, I've got to have it proved to me this time!"

"No outfit?" asked Mesquite carelessly.

"No. Until recently there was no need for one. I hired a round-up crew when I needed it. Then—well, Fred said we needed an outfit. A small outfit. We were going to get one. Now Fred's gone."

"Did he name any names, in talkin' about th' outfit?" asked Mesquite.

"Yes; some."

"Then you better hire 'em."

"You don't mean—you don't mean that you are going to break your journey again?" quickly asked the ranchman.

“No,” answered Mesquite, smiling a little. “I’m just trying to tell you not to copper Fred’s bets. I Agger he knowed what he was talkin’ about. He oughta.”

“I see. I wish I could—no. No. I have no business to ask you to change your plans.” Jordan’s face clouded, and he sighed as he half turned away. “If Fred was alive-” He let the sentence die, walked to a window, and stood staring out of it, seeing nothing.

The silence was becoming a little awkward when the bartender, his mind running back over a conversational trail, seized upon the abandoned thread of interest, and went on with it.

“There ain’t no place to stay overnight, except with me,” he said, looking at the stranger. “I ain’t much stuck on sleepin’ double, but you can have half of my bed. Looks like that’s th’ best bet.”

“I don’t need it,” replied Mesquite, who also did not care to sleep double. “I’ll roll up in my blankets, outside som’er’s, an’ eat breakfast with you.”

Jordan was thinking of many things, among them the proper burial of old Fred. It should be, of course, out on the ranch, on the crest of some sun-kissed rise; but there was Sarah. She would want to attend, would insist on it. As it was she would feel Fred’s death deeply enough without being further crucified by the details of a frontier burial. She would resent it, of course, if she was ignored; but old Fred was going to be buried here in town, where he had lived, and right away. Then she could argue all she cared to, and get no place. The thought made him smile faintly: it would be one of the rare occasions when her arguments failed. He slowly became aware of the conversation along

the counter, ran back through the words he had heard without heeding, coupled them into a more or less vague pattern, and turned slowly to face the speakers.

“Why not spend the night with me?” he asked. “I’d like to have you see my place, and you might be able and willing to give me some good advice—God knows I need some. I’m trying neither to tempt you nor to bribe you. There are some things I would like to talk to you about.”

“That’s th’ play,” said the bartender, judiciously. His words rang with the finality of the decision of a court, and perhaps had more real warrant, since they were based on facts rather than technicalities.

Approving nods and grunts endorsed the suggestion, and Mesquite’s thin smile favored them all. They were doing his worrying for him. He nodded, looked at Jordan, and waited.

The ranchman spoke to the group in a low voice, and after a moment it broke up, its members departing, each to do his share of what remained to be done for old Fred.

A blazing sun, a dusty trail, men trudging slowly on foot as a mark of respect, carrying on their shoulders a burden which grew steadily heavier. Ahead was a little knoll with two upright, sun-bleached head-boards, like pointing fingers of fate. Soon there would be three. The melancholy task performed, the little group trudged townward, silent, thoughtful.

Tim led the way into the room and took up his accustomed place behind the bar, waving his hands expressively. When each man was served he raised his glass.

“To th’ mem’ry of th’ late diseased,” he said, reverently; and the glasses were slowly emptied in silence, and slowly

returned to the bar.

Jordan turned reluctantly, looked at each man in turn, shook hands with them all, and led the way to the street. Mesquite followed him, swung lightly into the saddle, and in a moment was riding out of Yucca on his way to the Three J ranch.

CHAPTER III

MESQUITE, riding stirrup to stirrup with Jordan, glanced ahead at the high rise against the horizon, and then sidewise at his companion. He was retracing his course of only an hour or so before. There had been only one ranch along that trail within reasonable riding distance of Yucca: the ranch with the woman. His mind whisked back to review his observations, made on his previous journey, of the few cows he had seen along the way, but showed him no Three J brand. The animals had been so far away that the brands had not been recognizable; otherwise his cowman's eye would have registered them automatically. Brands are a dominant note on the open range, where a cow is only a cow, but a brand is a brand. In his mind's eye he was back at the ranch-house porch. She had mentioned her brother—he squirmed a little in the saddle, and unconsciously squared his jaw; but there was nothing to worry about: a man could always ride on again. A ghostly movement caught his attention, and he smiled at the rolling tumbleweed: that was the way a man should be; but he did not realize that the tumbleweed had to die before it was free to roll. Some analogies are disquieting if carried through to the end. Then his mind flashed back to the present moment and he looked at his companion again.

“Rustlin’?” he asked abruptly.

Jordan emerged from his mental preoccupation. It took him an instant to orient himself, to scrutinize that single word and to run back with it, to hook it onto something for the making of sense. He got back as far as the killing of Fred, found a connection, and slowly shook his head.

“No,” he answered, and jogged along in silence for perhaps a minute; anyhow, it was a long time. “No,” he repeated.

Mesquite saw another tumbleweed. This one interested him especially because it had rolled against an imprisoned windrow of its fellows and came to rest. That was not the way, he decided; and then chuckled: it only needed a shift of wind to set it free again. It only needed motion: well, a horse would provide motion.

“No,” echoed Mesquite with a peculiar finality, as if he were checking items in his mind. Two hundred a month! Good jobs seemed to be easy to find, down in this part of the country. Two hundred a month— two hundred dollars— dollars: what were dollars? There was always a catch to dollars. Dollars were dangerous. In this instance the catch was a good job, and the better the job, the more dangerous it was: it was like that windrow of helpless tumbleweed. But a man had a horse. He laughed gently, and sensed his companion’s quick glance.

“I was just thinkin’ of tumbleweeds an’ dollars,” he explained, and be it said to Jordan’s credit that he evinced no apparent curiosity; but the strange statement prodded him into lively mental activity. This cryptic young man was going to prove to be a godsend. The stimulus of this unexpected dose extended to the physical, and made the rancher sit up straighter, throwing a little more weight on the stirrups. What sensible rigs these Western saddles were! Tumbleweeds *and* dollars: h’m.

“If tumbleweeds were dollars we would all be rich in this country,” he said, himself taking an interest in the gyrations of defunct individuals of that species.

“An’ they, poorer,” grunted Mesquite. By this time all uncertainty had died: they were heading directly toward the ranch with the olla and the girl.

There was another interval of silence, and brief as it was, it showed how two minds, starting at scratch with the same thought, can branch and reach entirely dissimilar points. Perhaps three plugs were used in the mental switchboard, three different plugs in each line; but if you square each result you run into figures. There are eighty-eight notes on the pianoforte, and it takes a pageful of figures to represent the different combinations possible; and long before that the figures become meaningless; and if each note was a branching point, instead of being a passive unit—well!

“They may come out to the ranch,” said Jordan, really talking to himself.

Mesquite tore his mind from the picture of the water hole which the olla was responsible for, and showed a polite interest.

“Yeah?” he asked.

“But you would be no safer in town,” said Jordan. The water hole became old Fred, lying on a hard-packed clay floor.

“Yeah,” he said again; “but Tim is a whole lot safer.”

Jordan took this unexpected nugget and examined it. He glanced at his companion.

"Yes; a lot safer," he said. "Damn it, man, you are a mental catalysis!"

Mesquite pondered the word and looked at him curiously.

"You bein' friendly, I reckon that's all right." "What?" asked the ranchman.

"What you just said I was."

Jordan threw back his head and laughed.

"Of course it is! That's just my way of saying that you are doing things to my mind; that you're making me think hard to keep up with you. How old are you, anyhow?"

"Twenty-odd, on th' small end."

"Yes? Then I've got great hopes for you," said the ranchman, and then he abruptly waved his hand, the gesture embracing a large section of real estate. "You're on the ranch, Mesquite."

"Nobody would know it by himself."

"No; what few cattle there are favor the other side, over there in the heliotrope."

The tint lay like a blanket along the foot of the distant hills, and at one point it seemed to reach back for miles, filling a narrow gap, or pass, in the range. Above it, and farther back, one solitary striated finger of rim-rock, clay, sandstone, and shale wore a molten tip, which even then appeared to be cooling as the sun's rays slipped upward and finally passed above it. The heliotrope changed to purple in the pass, and seemed to flow out, darkening the nearer band until it was like itself.

"Many of 'em?" asked Mesquite.

"No," answered the rancher; "but they are improved stock."

"Heavy beef," grunted Mesquite, his mind flashing back to the Lazy S, where the cattle had run mostly to the old Longhorn breed; but the new Durham sires would alter that, and Mrs. Ricketts . . . "An' no rustlin'," he said, again in the present.

"Fred saw no signs of it; but the thought was beginning to bother him."

"H'm. Sometimes that play comes later than usual," said Mesquite, his indirection saving him from the possible accusation of being curious. Anyhow, he was not curious: the Three J was nothing to him; neither it nor its troubles. He was going to spend the night there, and in the morning he would be riding on again, and he would make certain that he would run into no windrows. He was not going to be dependent upon a shift in wind. The thought made him chuckle, and the sound, of course, in view of the conversation, was misinterpreted; but before Jordan could express his thoughts he had to shift again. "Th' last time," continued Mesquite, "th' rustlin' came first. It came before th' murder."

"Twenty-odd, on the small end," mused Jordan. "H'm!"

"Hopalong would like this," muttered Mesquite.

"What's that?"

"I was just thinkin' that Hopalong Cassidy would like this layout: *with* rustlin'," amplified and amended Mesquite. He was grinning.

"I seem to have heard that name," admitted Jordan, searching his memory.

"Yeah? Then mebby you've also heard of George Washington," suggested Mesquite, the grin growing.

Jordan pondered the remark and then laughed suddenly. Lights were dancing in his eyes. Still, he *was* on the defensive.

"You, yourself, noticed that I am not a Westerner," he replied, and then chuckled. "Perhaps you'll have time, nights this winter, to improve my sectional history."

Mesquite watched the tumbleweed and slowly shook his head.

"No. Th' man I'll be talkin' to, nights this winter, will be tellin' *me* things about *him*. Mebby I'd better go back to Yucca: I don't like th' idear of Big John not bein' able to find me."

"If he wants to find you, he'll come out to the ranch. He knows the way," said Jordan significantly. "He has *his* problems, too; which perhaps accounts for the no-rustling. My sister is a right pretty girl." The color deepened in his cheeks and neck, the gray flannel collar contrasting with it. "Do you know—I've been tempted to pack a gun."

"Yeah? You better saw off th' barrels of a scatter-gun," suggested Mesquite, icy glints in his eyes. Jordan noticed for the first time that the eyes lacked depth, that a man could not see into them; but, being strange to his present environment, this told him nothing. Mesquite kept on talking. "Buckshot ca'tridges. Under yore coat, with a sling goin' over th' shoulder, like Doc Halliday. Doc is right well known, an' nobody argues with him, serious. I saw she is a

right pretty girl." He moved restlessly in the saddle. "There's a trace of alkali in yore drinkin' water."

Jordan chuckled, felt of his beard, promised himself to shave before bedtime, and looked smilingly at his companion.

"She's very suspicious of strangers," he said, his eyes on Mesquite.

"Which you don't want to copper," replied Mesquite. "This country strike you as bein' absurd?"

"No. No country is absurd. Absurdity is reserved for humans."

"Which is just about what I told her, in my own way," said Mesquite, frowning.

Jordan's laughter made no sound, and Mesquite, looking straight ahead, did not sense it.

A woman was a woman, but sometimes she was a sister, or a mother. That was different, of course. A man naturally would worry about his sister. Big John

had not started rustling. Mesquite dug up a depleted tobacco sack and a crumpled mass of papers. His fingers worked swiftly in time with his thoughts. With the cigarette halfway to his lips and two fingers reaching into a vest pocket, he turned to face his companion and let his gaze drop to the outheld match. He had a hazy visual image of a very swift motion.

"*Gracias*," he said, absently, taking the match. His mind was far from matches, although he held this one for a moment without moving his hand, and spoke of another. "Go after

another match, *fast*," he said, simply, his eyes on Jordan's hand.

He refused the second, nodded to himself, and lit the one he had been holding. Exhaling a lungful of smoke, he nodded again, and again his eyes glinted icily.

"If I was spendin' winter nights with you," he casually remarked, "we wouldn't bother with no hist'ry. We'd put a gun in th' place of that match, an' mebbly make hist'ry, come spring. A gun not too long, or too heavy." He could see the olla on the porch, and hear the slam of a door. It reminded him of a distant .45 slamming against the eardrums. Into his mind came a picture which might serve for Big John. It was the composite picture of a type. Ten days' beard, tobacco-stained; the odor of whiskey and horses, penetrant, dominating; a coarse, brutal face, and pig eyes. Damn any man with pig eyes. The nose was broad, darkly ruddy, and streaked with fine purple lines. Unconsciously he drew up, and then seemed to be mildly surprised when he found that his horse had stopped. He shook his head wonderingly at his companion's look of questioning surprise.

"Must-a been still thinkin' about goin' back to Yucca, without knowin' it," he explained. It almost pained him to think of Big John searching in vain.

"If he wants to find you, he'll come out here," replied Jordan, with a scowl. "It'll be a brand-new excuse for him, not that he needs any!"

Mesquite glanced around the plain and noticed that they were riding over a gently rounding high spot which the winds kept clean. There were no tumbleweeds in sight.

“You got a short gun in th’ house?” he asked, and then became vexed with himself for the words. They might be regarded by his companion as a promise. He didn’t want to mislead a man like Jordan.

CHAPTER IV

THEY let their horses walk up the gentle slope of the rise, not because of any conscious direction but because both men were lost in thought and the horses took advantage of it. The horizontal lines of the flat roof pushed up into sight, and Mesquite’s gaze rested on the protruding ends of the roof beams. Adobe was the answer man made to this environment, the perfect answer. The altitude here was considerable, and the diurnal temperature changes swift and marked; yet the comfortable temperature within those walls was remarkably constant: pleasingly cool during the heat of the day, snug through the colder hours of darkness; and the walls were heat-retaining during the winter months.

The flat roof extended out from the rear wall and made the porch; and there, hanging from a rough beam, was the olla, moistly dark around the lower half, caressed by the gentle wind. His moving glance took in a tumbleweed, driven against the side wall, where it had been caught and held by the stalk of a flower. A rolling tumbleweed caught by a flower. A rolling tumbleweed caught and held—a disturbing analogy flashed into his mind and remained there for a moment; and it was banished only by a distinct act of will. A hard smile crept about his lips and his head shook gently. What was it his companion was saying?

“. . . stuck to the bunkhouse, even to cooking his meals,” ran Jordan’s words. “Sarah is very human, and far more Western in spirit than I am; but Fred was set, and liked to think he

was hard and tough, like a shag-bark hickory in an Illinois bottom. Really, he was about as tough as a cottonwood, if we stick to our simile."

Mesquite raced backward mentally and nodded, but before either could speak again they were close to the house; and the appearance of a feminine figure on the back porch made them clear their mental decks. There was some explaining to be done.

She looked inquiringly at them, watched her brother dismount, and saw the big hat come off his companion's head. This was the same man who had stopped for a drink earlier in the day; but before she could say anything, her brother spoke.

"This is Mesquite Jenkins, Sarah; Mesquite, this is my sister. Mesquite is staying overnight with us, Sis. I hope he will stay longer, but that's his affair more than mine." He hesitated, regarding her closely, and decided to take the plunge and get it over with. "Fred's not working for the Three J any more." "Fred—not working for us any more?" Her expression showed a great surprise and a little dismay. They had leaned a great deal on Fred, and liked him, too. "Rather abrupt, this change, isn't it, John?" She looked squarely at the stranger, accusingly; and there was no friendliness in the expression of her face.

"Yes; rather," admitted Jordan, slowly. "I—ah— I found it abrupt enough when I learned about it, back in town. The fact of the matter is: Fred is no longer—ah—alive."

One hand stole upward and rested on a breast. Her expression was lost to Mesquite, for at that moment he was critically studying the adobe bunkhouse without seeing much of it. Damn it all: he should have remained in town.

“He’s—dead?” she asked, her low, hesitant words barely audible.

“Yes; dead,” answered Jordan. “He was shot—and killed. The proper term, I believe, is murdered. That is the unofficial verdict of those who were unfortunate enough to see it. Mesquite, here, was one of the onlookers.”

She could see old Fred. He had been more or less uncertain about shaving, and the stubble on his genial face had had a reddish tint. Little crinkles of good nature were about his frank blue eyes, and around the corners of his lips. He had worn leather and carried steel; but to her they were affectations, theatrical effects which misled no one, least of all her. Was this stranger to take his place? She looked at him and saw the same leather and steel; instead of the almost fat face of Fred, the reddish stubble, the crinkles of good humor, she saw something entirely different, something which almost made her gasp. She could not name it then, but it was there.

The figure was lean, but solid and compact. The smoothly worn leather was dark and slick and ominous; the steel, multiplied twice, looked cold and dangerous. Instead of the red stubble she saw the blue-black of closely shaven jowls; and instead of the crinkles of good nature around the eyes and lips she saw one deep vertical line cutting the forehead above the lean arched nose. The firm chin was cleft. And as the stranger became aware of her scrutiny, resented it and turned to look at her, she saw that the blueness of his eyes were of a different tint—a washed-out, metallic blue. The hand against her breast tensed and increased its pressure. Her heretofore loosely coupled connection with this Western country had gone with Fred: henceforth she was truly to live close to it, to find it stark and ominous. Her

frown had grown unknowingly. Suddenly she bit her lip, whirled swiftly, and entered the house.

Jordan looked after her, a trace of surprise on his face. After a moment he turned to the horseman.

"She liked old Fred," he said. "I should have worked around to it more gradually. But then, she'll have it all straightened out by supptime. I'll show you around, although there's not much to see." He swung back into the saddle and led the way to the bunkhouse, waving his hand to the right. "At some time this ranch must have been quite an affair. There's bunks in that house for a dozen men. Look at that blacksmith shop, those corrals."

"How many cattle you got?" asked Mesquite, whose appraisal of a ranch did not run much to buildings.

"Thousand head."

"What ages?"

"Why, I hardly know. I left that kind of thing to Fred. We must have all ages. Why?"

"How long you had this ranch?" asked Mesquite.

"Two years."

"Then th' cattle older than that ain't improved stock?"

"Why, no. That's right: they're not."

"You can use two men and a foreman. If you got any cows past th' bearin' age, or even close to it, you want to git rid of 'em. Steers four years old an' over also want to be sold."

They're just grass eaters, an' don't get no more valuable. How come you got no riders with a thousan' head?"

"As I said in town, Fred was talking about hiring two men. Up to this he has been able to take care of the herd."

"That so?" asked Mesquite, turning frosty eyes to his host. "How many different saddles could he set in at th' same time?"

"He said the cattle liked their own range so much that they did not stray."

"New breed to me," grunted Mesquite. His gaze lifted and took in the distant hills.

"We have almost all of the water in this section of country, on this watershed," explained Jordan, smiling faintly.

"Uh-huh," said Mesquite, certain matters beginning to clear up in his mind. "Most of th' water, huh? Does it stay with you strong in th' dry months?"

"Yes," answered the ranchman. "That's the—ah— why, yes, it does."

"Uh-huh," grunted the visitor, thoughtfully. For a moment he was silent, and then, abruptly: "Who's this feller Jed Peters ride for?"

"Big John. You forgot him so soon?"

"No. I'm thinkin' of him, right now. What's his brand?"

"Tumbling L, they call it," answered Jordan. "It's an L, balanced on the tip of the lower line."

“Yeah, I know that. Big John foreman, or owner?” persisted Mesquite.

“He’s the owner. Jed Peters is the foreman. It’s a rough outfit, and not well liked.”

“Yeah, so I figgered. Do they notch?” asked Mesquite.

“What?”

“Do they notch—cut th’ ears of their cattle?” “Yes.”

“I ain’t seen one of yore animals close up. Th’ hoss yo’re ridin’ ain’t in yore own brand. You notch, too?” asked Mesquite.

“No. That’s one thing I will not allow.”

“Slick-ear,” muttered Mesquite, “th’ rustler’s pet.”

He raised his voice. “Why don’t you allow it?” he asked curiously.

“There’s no need to hurt animals unnecessarily,” answered Jordan, somewhat shortly, as if that were a subject which he had discussed before.

“Hell!” snorted his companion. “Seems like it might be necessary. Saves a lot of trouble readin’ cattle in a close herd or when th’ hair’s long an’ kinda masks th’ brand. Saves trouble in other ways, too, which you may damn’ well find out. Why, there ain’t no feelin’ in th’ ear tissues! You brand, don’t you? Well, that hurts aplenty. You make steers, don’t you? That hurts a lot worse. Who you got in mind to run this ranch for you?”

“Why, I haven’t had time to think about that,” answered Jordan. “There was no need to think about it until this afternoon.”

“Uh-huh. What kinda ear notches does th’ Tumblin’ L use?” persisted Mesquite, getting back on the trail again.

“They cut a V-shaped notch in the end of each ear.”

“Swallow fork, right and left? Uh-huh. Looks like mebby you got to register some notches of yore own. If it was me, I know how I’d notch my animals.” He rubbed his chin and gently shook his head. “Slick-ear! Hell!”

They were about to pass the bunkhouse, and the visitor drew up, swinging a leg over the saddle to dismount. Jordan followed suit and led the way indoors.

He turned to face his guest and saw that person looking about the room. Mesquite walked toward the stove, nodded with satisfaction at the small pile of firewood near it, and slipped off his coat. His eyes were swiftly scanning the walls. They were of adobe, capable of stopping bullets, and the windows were high and narrow. If Big John came out here a-hunting he would better bring his whole outfit with him. He stooped and reached for some firewood, whereupon Jordan’s expression seemed to ask for an explanation, and it was forthcoming.

“This will be a lot better than back in town,” said Mesquite, smiling. “I’m gettin’ to be sociable as hell. Hope Big John an’ that Jed Peters come a-visitin’ before mornin’.” He looked at the stove and chuckled. “I alius did like to cook my own grub, an’ have plenty of room for my elbows. I didn’t think much of sleepin’ with Tim, in one bed. Besides, you never can tell what a stranger’s got fastened to his skin.”

“But you can’t do this!” protested Jordan earnestly. “You’re my guest, and you eat with us!” He tried to mask the smile, gave it up, and let it turn into a laugh. “Man! Put on your coat and come up to the house. My sister would never forgive us. Come on; come on!”

Mesquite’s look of contentment faded. He was playing another man’s game, and was not quite certain about the rules. He glanced at the narrow windows and at the stove, shrugged his shoulders, and reached for his coat. A man had to do certain things, like a

kid had to get the measles. There were a lot of damn-fool customs, with no sense at all in them. It was like going through foolish motions in a lodge. Now he had to sit down to a table, which like as not would be covered with a white cloth and all littered up with fixings. There would be napkins, too. A man must never tuck a napkin in his neckband—the best place for it, however. Mrs. Ricketts had told him that. Napkins slid off leather chaps like rain off a roof; but a man could always slip one end under a belt, and make a hitch, if he had to. A knife was not a shovel. Mrs. Ricketts had told him that, too. Every damn’ mouthful would be handled in the presence of a woman, a strange woman, a woman with a damn’ pretty color and a wave in her hair. A tumbleweed never should stop rolling. Sleeping double with Tim was a better idea than he had thought.

“All right,” he said, without enthusiasm; but he made no move to take the lead. He was now looking at the bunks, two double tiers of them along one side and one end wall. All were bare boards except the lower, right opposite the door. Its tumbled blankets were thrown back, and the depression in the pillow showed where Fred’s head had rested only the

night before. It looked like a regular pillow, too: goose hair, no doubt. Fred certainly pampered himself.

Jordan seemed to read his guest's thoughts, and he chuckled.

"Fred preferred an old blanket, rolled up; and if it smelled of horses, he liked it better. That pillow is Sarah's contribution to his comfort. They had quite an argument about it, but Sarah won out."

Mesquite frowned. The woman always won out. A man was not even safe from them in a bunkhouse. Wake up some morning and find a ribbon tied onto a fellow's gun. Great God! Well, a night didn't last forever; and he'd see that he was miles away before another sundown. He sighed and turned to face the door, waiting for orders like a soldier.

"Turn your horse into the corral?" asked Jordan, pausing outside.

Mesquite looked into the enclosure, found no horse in sight, and knew that there would be no one to wrangle in a night horse. If he turned Thunder into the corral he would have to feed it. All right: he would do that later. He nodded, stepped forward, and swung into the saddle. After a moment he reached the corral, turned Thunder loose, put up two bars, picked up his riding gear and blanket roll, and headed for the bunk-house. Jordan had driven his own horse into a stable. He thought of his blankets. If he slept in the house he would not need them, and that seemed to be the programme. Dropping his burdens inside the door, he stepped back, joined the ranchman, and followed him toward the main house. The odor of cooking food met them halfway, coming down the wind, and they hastened their steps. Funny how a man can get

hungry all at once. He glanced along the porch for the wash bench, saw none, and sighed with resignation. He was entirely at the mercy of his host. There'd be a wash basin and pitcher, with ribbons, maybe.

Jordan opened the door into the kitchen and waved his guest in before him. The heat from the stove was noticeable, and a pot and other utensils were making blubbling, watery noises. Sarah Jordan, her sleeves rolled up an inch or more above the top of the coat of tan, gave him a glance and prodded at bobbing potatoes. Jordan, pivoting quarter way around on his heels, indicated another door. It was the washroom, and a spick-and-span white towel hung from the head of a twenty-penny spike driven into the adobe. The towel was so white that it almost frightened him.

He felt in his pocket and produced a toothbrush, which he placed on a ledge, not noticing Jordan's look of surprise. He had fought more than one man about that toothbrush, and people who knew him well no longer cared to joke about it very much. He had been told more than once that he was the only cow wrastler known who used such an effete and effeminate article. What of it? It was a hell of a note if a man couldn't do one of the things he had been taught by his mother. When a man could split a pistol bullet on a knife edge at twenty paces, and whip any man near his weight at rough-and-tumble, he was privileged to brush his teeth as often as he wanted to. Should he close the door before he washed up? Mrs. Ricketts hadn't mentioned that. He let his elbow brush against the door carelessly, and it swung nearly shut.

When it opened again he saw that Jordan had disappeared, and he stood hesitant between the two rooms, thinking mean things about his host for running away like that.

"John's on the porch, waiting for you, Mr. Jenkins," said the hot and busy cook, motioning with a three-pronged fork.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, and faded swiftly from her sight.

CHAPTER V

ALL things have an end except, perhaps, a straight line, which we now are told curves through space and really is a hoop; and the supper was not a straight line. It came to an end, having nothing to do with space; but to one diner's way of thinking, it had entirely too much to do with time. It was a good supper, so far as the food was concerned: as good as any he ever had eaten; but otherwise it was on the minus side. Jordan was natural and affable, and had a range of knowledge far beyond Mesquite's wildest dreams. A man could get along first class with the ranchman.

The burr under this particular saddle was the sister. She was polite enough, and did not make him feel that he was a section of flooring; but she was obviously hostile. He believed that she resented the thought that he might step into Fred's place; she even might suspect him of negligence in the matter of Fred's death. A woman didn't understand things like that, especially an Eastern woman.

While he had been eating, his attention had been occupied quite considerably with necessary motions; but now that they were sitting back in their chairs he found the situation becoming unbearable. Should he wait for Jordan to make the first move? Mrs. Ricketts had overlooked that. Then he thought of his horse, and remembered that it had not been fed. A man could generally depend on a horse.

"Thunder's got to be fed," he said, abruptly, looking around on the floor for his hat. The hat, of course, was in the

washroom, where he had dropped it on the floor under the window.

Jordan pushed back and arose, excusing himself. Mesquite felt that any words he might utter would sound locoed, so he nodded to fill in any possible breach. When he got to the washroom he found the hat hanging on another twenty-penny, and he jerked it away so savagely that only the quality of the material saved it from harm. It was the first time in his short life that a hat had made him feel like a fool so many times hand-running. He ought to take Fred's job as a mark of defiance. No woman could make him feel-What was Jordan saying?

"It won't take long," came the ranchman's voice. "If you don't want the hat, toss it over there, where mine is."

Mesquite glanced at the up-ended packing case with the Stetson lying on it, and put plenty of expression in the movement of his wrist. The big hat scaled like a saucer and struck squarely on the peak of Jordan's headgear. He glared at it for a moment, and then stepped out to the porch, where the ranchman awaited him.

They strode toward the corral, keeping step, Jordan shortening his own stride to keep time to the choppy movements of his companion's legs.

"Well," he said, smilingly. "There's one thing in your favor if you should decide to take the job." He made a funny sound in his throat and seemed to be pleased about something.

"Yeah?" replied Mesquite, his mind turning to the common duties of a ranch foreman. He, too, felt that he was qualified for the job, if he wanted it.

“Sis likes you, right at the beginning,” explained Jordan, and again shortened his stride. A slight frown flashed to his face. “What makes all you boys walk like that?”

“Great Gawd!” muttered Mesquite. There was some mistake about that. She hadn’t impressed him that way. Then he turned an inquiring face toward his companion. “Like what?” he demanded.

“Why, short, choppy steps. None of you swing from the hip. It’s all knee and ankle with all of you. Why, you’d kill yourselves walking ten miles.”

“We oughta be killed if we walked that far,” retorted Mesquite. “You ever wear these tight boots, with high heels, an’ walk ten miles in ‘em?”

“Never wore them, and I never will,” said Jordan emphatically. “I used to believe that there was nothing affected about a cowpuncher; but the boots and heels made me change my mind.”

“You ever ask anybody about ‘em?” demanded Mesquite, somewhat sharply. She liked him right at the beginning. Hell!

“No. Why should I?”

“Well, if you ever ride a bad hoss, an’ have trouble, an’ yore flat heels lets a foot slide in through th’ stirrup, an’ th’ hoss pitches, an’ you get dragged by one laig somewhere about them same ten miles, then you’ll get rid of rockin’-chair heels right smart. Don’t you try to tell me nothin’ about ridin’ boots.”

Jordan’s reply was a thoughtful and prolonged silence. After a moment he waved toward the stables along one side of the

corral, and waited while his visitor took care of his horse. The return to the house was made in silence, but as they simultaneously put one foot on the porch, Jordan spoke in reply to his companion's glance.

"All right; be pleasanter out here. How about a drink?"

"Spread mine right thin," said Mesquite. He sank into a chair and wished he could remove his boots. He had worn them for a good many hours. His gaze rested longingly on the bunkhouse, and he killed a grin as he pictured Fred's goose-hair pillow.

Jordan returned carrying a tray in his hands, and a bunch of something under his arm. He moved the elbow outward, and four carpet slippers fell to the floor. He kicked two of them toward Mesquite, and went on to the table.

"Those will fit you good enough," he said. "Might as well be comfortable. You're not on a pitching horse now, and nobody will try to drag you. You like lemon in yours?"

"Lemon?" asked Mesquite foolishly, trying to get his amazed thoughts off of the unbelievable and utterly-damned carpet slippers. Why hadn't he darned his socks last night, when he had the chance? He was getting as bad as a Mexican, always putting things off. "Lemon?" he repeated, parrot-like.

"Whiskey sour," explained Jordan, smiling. "Perhaps you'd prefer to have yours without trimmings?"

"I'm alius willin' to learn somethin' new; an' th' lemon may hide th' whiskey," replied Mesquite, his eyes on the door. Yes, he was right: steps were approaching the door from within the kitchen. He sighed softly.

Sarah stood in the opening, looking from one man to the other.

"You men want to talk business?" she asked.

"Perhaps," answered Jordan, motioning for her to take a seat and join them. "No reason why you shouldn't listen, though. You'll likely add a deal to your sketchy knowledge of ranching."

Mesquite flashed a malignant but triumphant glance at the slippers, kicked them to one side, and stood up hastily. Thank God that he hadn't gotten into them!

"Take my chair, ma'am," he said, looking her straight in the eyes. She was not a terrifying person at all.

"Thank you, Mr. Jenkins; but I have my own chair, and it's like an old friend. John and I sit out here every night. You see, we have not yet grown careless or callous about the miraculous light-changes on those hills."

"Yes'm. They're right pretty hills. What's on th' other side of 'em?"

He caught the suggestion of a frown as it flashed across her face. As she hesitated, her brother answered for her.

"Tumbling L," said Jordan. "Wish we had some ice. Haven't had any ice, out of season, for two years. There's the lemon juice, there's an empty, and here's the bottle. Write your own prescription."

"Well," said Mesquite, pouring gingerly from the bottle, and then offering the glass to his host, "you know more about this than I do. I was never much of a hand with liquor. Suppose you put in th' right dose of lemon?"

Sarah glanced down at the spurned slippers and smiled.

“Put on the slippers, Mr. Jenkins, if you wish,” she said, looking at Mesquite. “We believe in comfort, John and I.”

Mesquite stirred a little, his eyes on the damnable footgear. He glanced from them to Jordan and then on to the last speaker, and felt the keen edge of a guilty suspicion: had she guessed about the holes in his socks? Well, it served him right. He belonged in the bunkhouse.

“These boots are soft an’ handmade,” he said, “an’ old,” he added. “I’m right comfortable,” he lied. He took a drink, tasted it, and downed it like a boy taking castor oil.

“Mr. Jenkins,” said Sarah, leaning forward a little in her chair, “you were present when Fred was— was-”

He waited a moment, found that the sentence would never be completed, and slowly, gravely nodded.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Was it—really—murder?”

“Yes, ma’am, accordin’ to my lights.”

“John,” she said, turning a little, “this country has been sunny, smiling and pleasant. I wonder-”

The silence lasted for perhaps ten heartbeats.

“It’s life, Sarah,” said her brother. “The conditions are part of the environment. Out in this country things are different.”

“Will that Jed Peters get off?”

Jordan looked at the visitor, waiting for experience to speak.

"Yes," answered Mesquite, and again explained the matter, as he had during supper.

"If I—if I were a man—he would not get off!" "Oh, come, Sis! What chance would I—unless I shot him from behind!"

"I wasn't thinking of you, John; not especially. Not in *that* way at all. I'd rather you would not learn such a vicious art. I have asked you not to carry a gun. Perhaps there was a touch of selfishness in that: I could not very well get along without you, although that phase of it was not prominent in my mind. It would be committing suicide. But, John, do we really belong out here?"

"Everything we own is in this ranch," replied her brother. "/ belong out here, on it. You can return to the East if you wish. You know that."

"And you know better than to say that, John," she reproached him.

The silence was longer this time.

"If we only had somebody on whom we could rely," finally said Jordan. "A man to the manner born, in tune with the country, able to make a fight with this country's weapons—ah, well: you want lemon in this one, Jenkins?"

"No; *nor* ice!" answered Mesquite. He did not know just why he had mentioned the ice, unless it was unconscious affirmation that he was to the manner born, in tune with the country, able to fight with its weapons. He glanced from the rancher to his sister, and back again. "You reckon you'll get into any trouble if they learn that you put me up for th' night?"

"No one chooses my guests for me, Jenkins," answered the ranchman.

"No," said Sarah, with decision. "No one does."

"Well, of course, they may never learn about it," muttered Mesquite.

Jordan laughed grimly.

"Big John's in town right now," he said, "asking questions. If he comes out here and asks them, he'll get the truth."

"Yes," said Sarah, simply.

Here was a pretty pickle. If he had ridden on about his business, or had remained in town overnight, these people would be a great deal better off. Jordan was a thoroughbred; and Sarah was his sister.

"You reckon you'll have time, to-morrow, to show me that water you was tellin' me about?" asked Mesquite, carelessly.

"Why, yes. I thought you were going to--"

"I can take a day longer for that trip, I reckon," interrupted Mesquite. "That is, unless it makes yore risk bigger?" He cleared his throat. "I may be able to tell you somethin' worth while about that water. There's a chance, anyhow. It's over near th' Tumblin' L?"

"Almost in a straight line with it from here," said Jordan. "The hills lie in between." He faced the distant, shadow-wrapped range, his arm rising, to fall again. "You can't see it now, but that pass you saw this afternoon is the easiest way between the two ranches."

“The risk does not matter, Mr. Jenkins,” said Sarah, clearly, decisively. “I doubt if it really exists. Mr. Trumbull can hardly take exceptions to our choice of guests.”

“Mr. Trumbull?” asked Mesquite.

“Big John,” explained Jordan. “No. Sarah’s right. It’s none of his business.”

“Unfortunately, looking at this thing in perfect frankness,” said Sarah, “it does not happen to be in line with his present strategy.” Her voice was bitter, intensely so. She arose abruptly and faced the door. “I’ll leave you to yourselves. I have some work to do.” She swung part way round and faced the visitor, eye to eye. She was almost as tall as he. “In case I do not see you before morning, I’ll say good-night.”

“Good-night, Miss Jordan.”

“Good-night, Sis. Don’t you let anything worry you — nothing!”

They heard her steps die out in the dining room, and then slowly seated themselves, fumbling with tobacco and papers. One flaming match became two glowing dots, which rose and fell in fiery intensity. They were busy with their thoughts and, strange to say, both were thinking along the same line.

“The damned beast!” muttered Jordan, stirring restlessly, and then became acutely aware that he was not alone. “Shooting Fred down like that,” he added, but the break had been a little too long.

“Which beast?” asked Mesquite, idly.

"Big-What did you say?" asked Jordan, quickly correcting himself.

"Nothin'," replied Mesquite, both names in his mind. Jed Peters's name faded out and left Big John's. "We'll look at that water to-morrow. It might be better for a reservoir, if one can be built easily. They usually can, when you know how."

"Reservoir? Why invite more trouble?" demanded Jordan without thinking.

"Meanin'?"

"Why, the more valuable a thing becomes, the more it is wanted, isn't it?" replied Jordan, the fiery tip of his cigarette glowing suddenly.

"Reckon so," admitted Mesquite, his eyes on the cigarette tip. Little things like that often tell their own stories. The hills were lost in the darkness, and under the roof of the portico figures were indistinct. Jordan's head and torso were faintly silhouetted against the lesser outer darkness; but his legs at their lower ends became mere blobs that merged with the deeper dark along the floor. "Where's them slippers?" The speaker leaned forward, bent over, his hands groping. "Ha!" he muttered in self-congratulation. He looked up, watching the tip of the ranchman's cigarette. "Why was Fred killed?" he abruptly asked.

The dot glowed swiftly and died out.

"I don't know, exactly. He was not liked by the Tumbling L."

"So I figgered. Personal?"

"Yes, somewhat; but I did not believe it was strong enough to cause anything like that."

"Anybody but yoreself know he was figgerin' on puttin' two men in that bunkhouse?"

"He might have mentioned it in town. I did not." "Shore, he might-a. I don't hold much with liquor, myself. Did he have any plans, besides that?" asked the visitor. The slippers were pleasingly large and cool. The coolness was especially grateful.

"No, unless it might be the fence," answered Jordan, slowly.

"Fence?"

"Yes."

"Shore! It's a fine day, except for th' thunder an' lightnin' an' rain!" exploded Mesquite, sitting up straight in his chair. "Fence! Like pullin' a cowman's nose! Great Gawd! What fence? Where?"

"Over in the hills, across that pass."

"I'll tell you a secret, Jordan: th' killin' of Fred wasn't personal." Mesquite laughed ironically. "Fence builder, was he?"

"His killing wasn't personal?" asked Jordan. "No. It wasn't personal; an' I know it wasn't accidental, or th' wrong end of an even break, because I was right there an' saw it. We'll have a look at that water, right after breakfast. *An'* that fence. I can tell fortunes, Jordan."

"I envy you that accomplishment."

"There'll be a man guardin' that fence, an' it won't be a fence no longer."

“Well, it hadn’t been finished. Fred had only one spool of wire, and he had to wait for more posts.” The cigarette curved through the darkness and sent up a thin burst of tiny sparks when it struck. “The rest of the wire is out in the tool shed.”

“You got good title to this ranch, Jordan?”

“Yes; a deed.”

“Corners marked plain?”

“Yes.”

“That don’t take in, of course, th’ outlyin’ range,” stated Mesquite. “You just use that because yo’re handier to it, an’ control th’ water. But *do* you control th’ water?”

“Yes. It’s on the home ranch. On the original grant.”

“Where’s yore north line?” persisted Mesquite. “Along the tops of those hills. The water is this side of the line.”

“Title ever been questioned?”

“Once, before I bought it. It was sustained in court.” Mesquite yawned heavily and wriggled his toes. The slippers were perhaps a little too cool. The chill of the night was gnawing at his ankles and creeping down past the neckband of his shirt. He yawned again, and a quick stir replied to it.

“I guess it’s time you turned in,” said Jordan, standing up. His head was grotesquely blotted out by the olla, which made him resemble some preposterous pagan idol. “After two years out here, I still marvel at the splendor of these nights. Pass me on my right and you won’t bump into the olla. I’ve moved it twice, but I don’t want to put it any closer

to the wall, where the wind will have trouble getting at it. If we only had ice . . .” The words died out.

“There’s mebbly some in these slippers,” chuckled Mesquite, looking in through the open window. He could not see the lamp in the dining room, but its soft mellow light revealed the satiny finish of a walnut chest-of-drawers, a contribution of the old East to the young West. He did not see any suspicious shadow on the floor. Well, Sarah Jordan might have gone to her room. She might, however, be on the other side of the lamp. He hoped he would not have to walk sideways when he passed her, for that would be a dead giveaway, and might not be polite. His boots were tight-fitting, like a glove, but somehow they did wear out socks at the heels. Socks? The thought made him stop.

“Reckon I oughta get my blanket roll,” he said, enjoying the mental picture of a new pair of socks, a parting gift of Mrs. Ricketts. God bless her motherly old heart!

“All right,” replied Jordan, his knowing smile hidden by the dark. Of course, he was only guessing. “You believe you can find them without a light?”

“Them?” repeated Mesquite, suspiciously.

“Blanket roll *is* singular. I should have said *it*”

“Yeah, I can find it; be back pronto,” and the speaker melted away, the soft shuffle of loose carpet slippers persisting for some moments.

The bunkhouse was calm and dark, but the picture of that comfortable bunk was very plain. He stepped forward and stopped before it, looking down in the darkness in indecision. Too bad: he’d go through with the play. His hand went down, groped for a moment, and something struck the

floor so softly it could just be heard. Goose-hair pillows, indeed!

He turned toward the outside wall and groped along its base. In another moment he was through the door, the roll over one shoulder. A man could be very comfortable in that bunkhouse, if it was not crowded; and two other riders would leave him room enough for his elbows. He looked up and picked out Jordan's figure against the rectangle of light from the inner room. The ranchman was still admiring the desert night, and he turned toward the kitchen door as Mesquite reached his side. The visitor, taking a moment to find and pick up his boots, joined his host and followed him into the house. They were alone in the dining room.

Jordan smiled at the blanket roll and at the dangling boots. Little glints of lamplight danced on the shanks of the spurs. He waved his hand toward a door which stood partly open.

"That's yours," he said, picking up the lamp and handing it to his guest. "Perhaps I'd better lead the way?"

"No. I can handle it," said Mesquite. He shifted the boots to his left hand, took the lamp, and slowly turned toward his room.

For a moment the two men looked at each other, and they both grinned.

"Good-night, Mesquite."

"Good-night, John."

Two slow steps, a closing door, and the dining room was a pool of ink.

CHAPTER VI

BREAKFAST was a mild and not uncomfortable surprise to the booted guest. There was a certain daintiness about the table and the serving of the food which was strange to him; but it was unobtrusive and seemed to belong to this room. The coffee was a revelation, the bacon cooked just as he preferred it, the eggs a miracle, and the soda biscuits as light as bundles of down. Where had the eggs come from? In that day in the cattle country, eggs were decidedly very unlike Caesar's wife. Sarah Jordan looked like a flower. He wondered if the tumbleweed had gotten free, around in the flower bed at the side of the house. He decided that she was trying not to think of old Fred's death. Jordan had been right about holding the funeral in town. There was no use of reminding her of things like that. His gaze had been resting on the platter of eggs, and the golden bulls'-eyes intrigued him anew. Where had they come from?

. . Rocks, three dozen of them," Jordan was saying as if in answer to his guest's thoughts. "Good layers, and heavy enough to make good eating. They are one of our prized possessions."

"What's that?" asked Mesquite, realizing that his host was speaking. His gaze left the platter, flicked to Jordan, and on to Sarah. A flower, delicate in color, yet strong and sturdy. A flower, crisp with the freshness of morning. Again he thought of the imprisoned tumbleweed and wondered if it had managed to roll free.

"Plymouth Rocks: three dozen of them," repeated Jordan, proudly. He sensed Mesquite's preoccupation, strangled a smile, and continued: "Before we came out here, we always had eggs for breakfast, and we saw no reason to change the habit. I've got the chickens out in an adobe house that is entirely surrounded with coyote tracks. When the moon comes back again you can try your hand with them. They're

too smart for me: they just seem to fade away when the sights line up. I've got considerable respect for the little beggars."

"Right smart animals, coyotes," admitted Mesquite, smiling reminiscently. "They'll get those chickens, too, John."

"Traps don't work with them; poison is brushed aside. I found a piece of poisoned meat dragged off to one side and covered over with dirt! I'm a truthful man, Mesquite; but I hardly expect you to believe that statement."

Mesquite smiled, nodding his head.

"I could tell you things harder to believe than that," he said. "They'll get those chickens," he repeated.

"But that adobe is over a foot thick, and the floor is like iron. I've thrown broken bottles and rocks all along the base of the wall. They can't get in."

"They'll get those chickens."

"Another cup of coffee, Mr. Jenkins," said Sarah. She had not anticipated refusal, so it was not a question.

"But I've already had—three?"

"Counting cups of coffee is against the rules of the Three J," laughed Jordan. He watched the refilled cup being withdrawn toward its destruction, and held out his own.

"This is our own blend. It is shipped direct from the East. I'll have another with you, Mesquite, on the good old Mosaic law: only in this case it's a cup for a cup. I'm not much of a hand for liquor, like yourself—oh, now, Sis: I know, I know.—As I was saying before the sisterly interruption, I'm not much

of a hand for liquor, but I drink more coffee than any man on the range."

The tempting aroma of the coffee, the tantalizing whiteness of the biscuits were in the yesterdays, and the laggard sun poured a stream of yet cool light in under the roof of the porch and revealed the olla to be just a vessel of clay. Mesquite walked to the edge of the porch, looked out over the range, and carelessly glanced at the flower bed: the tumbleweed had gotten free during the night. He turned, walked slowly back again, and stopped near the ranchman, who sat in his easy chair, languidly smoking.

"Sit down; sit down and smoke a cigarette," said Jordan, smiling at his companion's restlessness. "We don't bolt our food and run, on the Three J. Sit down, man: we've got plenty of time."

Had Mesquite stood a few moments longer on the edge of the porch he would have seen something of interest; as it was, the rise shut it from his sight. He remained standing, looking down at the ranchman. Neither of them heard the soft footfalls of a horse coming at a walk across wind-drifted sand on the far side of the house; and Sarah Jordan, busy in the kitchen, was as ignorant of it as they.

"All right, John; but first I'll get my blanket roll an' toothbrush," said Mesquite, the tumbleweed feeling coming over him again. His present surroundings were like a masked threat, and he felt uneasy. The coyotes nightly disdained the traps around the chicken house. A coyote had good sense and a proper love of freedom. He swung on his heel and stepped inside the house, out of sight.

A long shadow swept across the washroom window and poked out into the sight of the man on the porch, caught his

attention, and held it. The sounds of the walking horse were suddenly very audible as it moved across the patch of flinty ground along the house.

In the washroom Mesquite stood silently considering : he did not wish to play the part of eavesdropper, although he had the feeling that he was concerned in this visit; but then, the ranchman knew where he was. While he was thinking it over he heard a strange voice, and almost instantly Sarah Jordan dropped a fork. Mesquite slowly turned his head and looked into the kitchen: Sarah held one hand to her breast, and the look on her face sent a little pulse of heat through him, and he unconsciously dropped a hand to a gun butt. He took one step toward her, about to speak; but she faced him swiftly, a finger going to her compressed lips. He stopped, relaxed, nodded reassuringly, and waited, looking away from her to save her from being embarrassed. She had nothing to fear, and he felt, somehow, that she knew it. If there were any objections made about the guests entertained by the Three J ranch, he'd answer them himself, in the way that would carry the most conviction.

"Mornin'," the voice said. "Mornin', Jordan. Havin' a little smoke after breakfast?"

"Good-morning," replied Jordan, ignoring the question and the affability which lay behind it.

"Just reckoned I'd ride over an' tell you how sorry I am about old Fred gittin' hisself killed," said the newcomer. "I alius knowed that feller Peters was a mite too quick on th' trigger; but this here is one time when he just couldn't do nothin' else."

Jordan said nothing, just sat and smoked and let the smoke drift from his nostrils. One would have thought that he was

alone.

The horseman fidgeted gently, and tried again.

"I feel so sorry about it, neighbor, that I'm offerin' you a boy or two of my own to handle things till you can git yoreself another man. If you like 'em well enough to keep 'em, why, that'll be all right. I can alius get good riders. They like to work for me." Jordan did not move or speak, but watched the shadow of a drifting cloud pass along the distant hills. The visitor cleared his throat.

"Fred was gittin' old an' kinda set, anyhow," he said, trying to see into the kitchen. "Still, I'm right sorry he forced Jed's hand. He should-a knowed better, old as he was."

"Mr. Trumbull," said Jordan, quietly, evenly, looking the horseman fairly in the eyes, "I don't carry a gun, and do not know how to use one, except in a bungling manner. I suppose the day will come when I, too, will force Jed's hand and make him shoot."

"Well, now," replied Big John, juggling the words in his mind. "I don't jest git th' drift of that."

"No man like you would miss the drift. I made it plain enough."

"Now, now!" expostulated the horseman. "I know yo're all upset about Fred; but you shouldn't oughta figger it out like that! Why, we're friends, Jordan; an' neighbors!"

"We are not friends; and I am forced to admit that we are neighbors. That much of your statement is true."

"Now, now! You oughtn't go on th' prod like this, Jordan!"

"I suggested to my sister, last night, that she go back East and remain there."

Mesquite moved gently in the washroom until he could look out through the kitchen window. Big John was not as he had pictured him. The nose was red instead of mottled purple: whiskey, instead of brandy. The lather on the horse had dried there. The animal looked to be very tired. The rider's eyes were sleepy, the lids heavy; and the lines on the coarse face were deepened by fatigue, and outlined by dust and grime. He did not like this Trumbull person. Why hadn't he remained in Yucca? He glanced at Sarah. Her hand had resumed its place at her side and she was looking at him. A faint smile, meant to be reassuring, passed across his face, to leave it bleak and cold again. The blue of his eyes was like the blue of ice. A little shiver ran up her back and trickled down. She became conscious of the worn, dark leather chaps, smooth as— as death; and she became conscious of something else: a deep, abiding sense of security.

"I reckon you'd shore miss her, an' her cookin'," said the horseman, forcing a smile. Sarah Jordan was not going to go East. "I thought mebby I'd say a few words to her," he suggested, tentatively. "Want to tell her how sorry I am about Fred."

"You may safely trust me to convey your expressions of sorrow," replied Jordan. "She prefers not to see callers this morning."

"Reckon so," said Big John contemplatively. "Quite a shock to a woman, I reckon. They ain't got a man's guts."

"No," said Jordan, after a moment's pause, "nor a wolf's."

"Huh? You shouldn't feel that way about it," said the horseman. He felt uncomfortable. He shifted again in the saddle and let a soiled finger scratch gently close to the hatband. He was handicapped; but he must not force a quarrel, yet. In the blunt and brutal play of the frontier, in the heat and swiftness of action, he was at home; but this cold fencing left him helpless, like an axeman before a fencer. If he chose, however, to force the issue along his own lines- But he was not yet ready to do that. He shifted again, cleared his throat, and turned the horse.

"Well, Jordan," he said in a brusque but friendly voice, "if you make up yore mind that you want to use a couple of my boys, just send me word."

"But they'll get the chickens," muttered Jordan, thinking of coyotes.

"Huh? By Gawd, but you have funny streaks; yo're a queer cuss, Jordan. Well, I'll see you ag'in soon. Oh, by th' way': you ain't seen no stranger around here, have you, John?"

"Stranger?" mused Jordan. "No; but my sister did. He stopped here yesterday afternoon for a drink of water. Then he rode on toward Yucca. There are no *strangers* on the ranch. You tell Jed Peters that if he'll hang up his murdering guns, I'll take great pleasure in killing him with my bare hands. That makes it another question of guts, as you so delicately put it. Good-morning."

"Slight-built feller he was, kinda," said Big John, and forthwith rattled off a fair enough description of Mesquite Jenkins, except that Mesquite could hardly be called slight. "This feller jumped onto Jed when Jed warnY lookin', an' damn near shot Jed's thumb off. I'm figgerin' to let him jerk

walnut ag'in a man that's lookin' for th' play. Well, see you later. So-long."

Had his ears been keener he could have heard a quick step inside the kitchen, and a breathed plea. Mesquite was moving forward to let the horseman find the man for whom he was looking; but Sarah's quick gasp and outstretched hand stopped him in his tracks. It was her game more than his, her game and her brother's.

"So-long, Trumbull; and don't go to too much trouble so far as the affairs of the Three J are concerned," replied Jordan, rolling another cigarette with steady fingers. He looked up at the olla and studied it intently as Big John rode away. The dark lower section, made darker by moisture, was too narrow. The vessel needed filling. After a few moments he got out of the chair and picked up a bucket.

Mesquite, still in the washroom, reached out a left hand with a motion strongly suggestive of a straight jab, picked up the toothbrush and slipped it into an upper vest pocket. Nearly shot off his thumb, huh? He was becoming criminally wasteful of lead. Jumped onto Jed when that gentleman was not looking! He swung around and stepped toward the door again, where he quickly stopped, one foot in the kitchen. Sarah's quick gesture was unmistakable.

"Not yet," she said, in a voice so low he barely could make out the words. "They may be—watching the ranch."

"They," grunted Mesquite. That meant more than one. The great Sharps was in its sheath, down on the saddle in the bunkhouse. In his hands a Colt counted coups at two hundred, thanks to Hopalong Cassidy; but two hundred was bashful in the presence of rifle fire. He studied her. By God, if he didn't ride on about his business, right soon . . . huh! His

business **1** If he didn't have business here, then he had none anywhere. A man could always pull his picket pin and ride on.

"John knows that I am not going East!" she said, flaring against her brother's remark.

"Shore; but he didn't say you was," replied Mesquite.

"That was the way Mr. Trumbull would interpret it!"

"Uh-huh. He could take it that way. If you'd gone East yesterday, I reckon mebbly you wouldn't have no brother today, less'n I was lucky enough to break up th' play. It looks like yo're plumb right about not goin'."

"Does it? If you only knew what it means for me to stay out here, with that, that- But you don't know, and you won't know. Just the same, I'm staying on this ranch with John."

"Shore. Do you know, I kinda figgered that Big John feller had a blue nose—but it's red. You ever drag a red cloth across th' open range, ma'am?"

Wonderingly, she shook her head. "No," she replied, and then: "Certainly not!"

"Well, that's one way of gettin' a maverick bull out of some draw, or chaparral, if you want to do it that way. An' he'll likely come out with his head down an' his tail plumb standin' up. Up to now I've been a sorta slick-ear, an' I'm right shore I've never been branded. That kinda makes me a maverick. Will you look at John spill that water?"

"He does that about every other morning," she replied, smiling a little. Her thoughts were really on red cloths, red

noses, maverick bulls, and thickets. "He fills that olla too full."

Jordan placed the bucket against the wall, glanced at the wet clay, and said something under his breath as he flashed a guilty look at the kitchen window; and at the step in the doorway he glanced around, to see his guest move lazily into sight. The shallow blue eyes were frosty, but the expression on the lean face was placid.

"And where's the blanket roll?" demanded the ranchman, curiously.

"Shucks!" grunted Mesquite, grinning ruefully as he hesitated. He leaned against the door casing, gently moving one shoulder against it. "I plumb forgot all about it, havin' too many ears. There'll be time enough to get it when I come back, I reckon; but," he said, triumphantly, patting a pocket, "I did get th' toothbrush!"

"Ah! And thus being armed, cap-a-pie, let us ride to the wars," said Jordan, smiling.

"Don't know what that funny word means, but I shore do know what that last one stands for," replied Mesquite. He glanced down at the porch floor. "You spilled th' water again," he accused.

"Again?" asked Jordan, and chuckled knowingly. "You' ve been listening to tales about me. I suppose Sis told you that that is an intermittent habit of mine. Sort of rhythm."

"You oughta get a smaller bucket," suggested Mesquite seriously.

"Why not a larger olla? There's often two ways to do a thing."

“Yeah; but shootin’ at thumbs ain’t one of ‘em.”

“Now you wait a minute! Let me gallop back into the yesterdays—ah: right you are. I wonder how much of that thumb you got?”

“Not very much, I hope,” growled Mesquite, pushing slowly away from the door casing.

“Not very much, you *hope*? Why the hope?”

Mesquite was studying the bunkhouse and only grunted.

“There should be a referee and a bell in any conversation with you; but the bell is the more essential of the two. Why the hope?” repeated Jordan, and then he raised his hand quickly. “Not a word, thank you! I’ve got it. By God, I hope so too, Mesquite!”

Mesquite’s gaze was again on the wet spot on the porch floor, studiously studying the disappearing spot without seeing it.

“Don’t let it fret you,” said Jordan, glancing down. “It’ll be dry again in ten minutes. There are no little orphaned wet spots lying around in this country. They dry right up.”

“Uh-huh,” muttered the guest, stirring slowly; “but lather don’t dry out while th’ hoss is sweatin’ under it. Let’s go look at that fence, or at what’s left of it.” “Lather! Which reminds me that I forgot to shave,” said the ranchman quickly, leading the way. “Come on to the fencing, and thank God one foil’s unbated, as the poet said.”

It was not long before they were riding toward the range of hills, directly and more particularly at the pass which dented

them. Jordan, riding at his companion's side, looked intently at the stock of the heavy rifle protruding from its sheath.

"That a rifle, or a harpoon gun?" he asked gravely. "Huh?" asked Mesquite, looking around in surprise.

"Didn't I see that weapon mounted on a tripod on the deck of a whaler, down East at New Bedford?" "That's Hoppy's gun—or one like it. It's a .45-120-550," said Mesquite. "Sharps," he added.

"They've cheated you on the figures: there should be more of them with a gun like that. Considerably more."

"Well, all right: I reckon we can add some more. Stick on eighteen hundred or two thousan'—that bein' th' length of its stinger, in yards."

"Glad you told me the last; otherwise I might have thought that it referred to the Plimsoll mark. *There's* some cattle."

"Old cows," grunted Mesquite. "First chance you get, you round up all that kind an' sell 'em. Cut out th' heifers an' drive 'em off by themselves until they're three years old; their calves will be all th' better for it. Ten years later, sell th' mothers."

"You're going to tell me all of these little things when I'm handy to pencil and paper," suggested Jordan. "For a young man you know a lot. Where'd you learn it?"

"Friends told me. Up in Montana. You've got to change all these slick-ears, next round-up. We'll figger that out before I leave."

"All right: we will," grunted Jordan, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. The stubble made a scraping sound against his

hand. "I should have shaved. That's your fault."

"How far's th' next town east?" abruptly asked Mesquite, the word *shaving* bringing to mind the word *lather*; and *lather*, other things.

"Thirty miles from Yucca. Why?"

"Sixty miles durin' th' night," mused Mesquite. "He had breakfast in Yucca after he got back this morn-in' ; an' then took his own time, ridin' easy, to get out here." He nodded slowly. "Th' boys in Yucca musta misled him. He wasn't a-tall suspicious that I was here. Blind as a bat, too: our tracks was right plain." He let his gaze rest on the ground ahead. "Much plainer than them, there," he added.

"What? Where?" asked Jordan, scrutinizing the earth.

"Tracks; coyote tracks on that little skim of sand."

"Where?" persisted Jordan, squinting.

Mesquite raised an arm and aimed a finger.

"There," he said.

Jordan squinted again, shook his head, and grunted.

"All right: take your word for it; but why do you think he went on to Wagon Springs—the first town east of Yucca?"

"It's th' right direction, an' about th' right distance, judgin' from that dried lather an' th' looks of th' hoss. Th' feller he was lookin' for, th' stranger that jumped onto Jed when he wasn't lookin', rode in outa th' west, headin' east. If he kept on his journey, Wagon Springs would-a been his next stop. Th' sixty miles makes it about right, for night ridin'. It would

be ten or fifteen, durin' th' heat of th' day. Jordan, it's too damn' bad that I'm so hard to find. Folks won't mebbly figger it right. If I had only myself to think about, I'd let 'em find me right quick." He was picturing Sarah's quick, forbidding gesture.

They breasted a sharper rise in silence, riding stirrup to stirrup. The rises slowly and steadily increased in pitch and number, and soon they were among the lower hills of the range. The bunchgrass became noticeably more plentiful, cured brown and curled down, with almost the nutriment of oats.

"Good range," muttered Mesquite. He noticed the steep-cut banks of several hills, facing south; and draws filled with brush: good winter range, with natural breaks against the north winds. "How come th' owners sold out to you?"

"Two years of high prices and a scarcity of beef," answered Jordan. "It went to their heads. They spent every cent they had and could borrow in buying young cattle. Mortgaged the ranch for all it would carry. The trouble was, almost everybody was doing the same thing. The prices broke the third year, and broke a lot of ranchmen with them. These people sold their cattle for what they would bring on a glutted market, found it wasn't enough, and had to let the ranch go. I bought it for almost nothing. No cattle went with it."

"If things break right with you, you'll be a rich man in ten years," said Mesquite, thoughtfully. "In this climate, with this rough country and unfailin' water, yore natural losses oughta be well under two percent. It all depends on how you buy an' what you sell. I can tell you somethin' about that, I reckon."

"More for the pencil-and-paper session," chuckled Jordan.

"Right-hand calk on th' off forefoot," muttered Mesquite, lost in abstraction.

"That's got a certain swing to it, a lilt," commented Jordan. "Words of a song? It isn't Gilbert and Sullivan: I know all of theirs."

"It ain't no song; but it may turn out to be a dance, for somebody," replied Mesquite. He allowed himself the luxury of a grin. "Yo're a funny feller, John." "Where did I hear that before, this morning?" asked Jordan, smiling.

Mesquite glanced at him quickly and frowned a little.

"I couldn't help hearing what was said," he stated. "I was caught flat-footed in th' washroom."

"I knew you were there," replied Jordan, chuckling. "As to being a funny feller, I can tell you one thing, Mesquite: I'm in a damned sight better humor to-day than I was yesterday." He checked his horse on the top of the hill and raised an arm, pointing. "See the glint of it?"

Mesquite nodded at the little patch of water visible beyond the shoulder of a distant hill, and rode on again. The remainder of the journey to the stream was largely a silent affair.

CHAPTER VII

HE WHO controls the water controls the range. This was the good old baronial formula, the basis of the almost feudal cattlemen of the old West. A homestead claim was often enough to control the water; if not one, then two, six, a dozen. The cattleman had an outfit, its size depending upon

and growing with the size and increase of his herds. In a section of country perhaps larger than Rhode Island, necessary for the grazing of the greater herds, there would be several water holes or streams. The cattleman took care of them by having his men file homestead claims, which he in turn purchased for a few dollars. In time he owned the water, and, by virtue of this, controlled the rest. Texas alone, being a republic before it entered the Union, had reserved its public lands and could sell them under any system which suited it: fifty cents an acre would not be a bad guess at what grazing land cost the cattlemen. The quality of the range varied. The all-year-round grazing of one animal required from two to nearly a dozen acres. In other words, a square mile of range would feed, the year round, from less than fifty up to three hundred head of cattle.

It was not necessary to fence. The cattleman's riders, riding the lines, turned back stray cattle of other brands; but even so, cattle had a persistent habit of ranging, and stray brands were found in round-ups almost unbelievable distances from their home range. Let a norther, which was a severe and prolonged blizzard, set in, and it would start cattle on a drift which might run to several hundreds of miles. A fence across the front of such a movement would stop the drift, but pile dead cattle up in a windrow.

To shoot an unarmed man, to run sheep in cow country, to change a brand, to steal a horse, to cheat at cards—or to string a fence—were crimes. Customs made the laws, the laws with honest warrant, and customs change: but not all customs. In these later days the range is mostly fenced, which really makes it a range no longer, since water has been obtained from driven wells and is no longer totally dependent on shrinking pools and timid streams. As the wells increased in numbers, fences were less frowned upon, since cattle were not being kept from water; and as the fences became more common, hard and fast boundary lines made their appearance. The day of the general round-up, a most picturesque affair, is almost over. With the fences came a greater incentive to improve the quality of the stock, breeding away from toughness in favor of heavy beef; and at the same time there came a reduction in the number of year-round riders; and the passing of the ubiquitous range bull and the persistence of inferior strains. As an experiment in heredity it may be possible to breed back to the old longhorn, but the trend is to breed away from it, retaining only the toughness of the original breed. In some parts of the West agricultural legislatures hastened the coming of the fence: Kansas, instead of requiring the farmer to fence in his crops against the encroachment of cattle,

made it worth while for the cattleman to fence in his herds to escape action for damages. Barbed wire slowly imprisoned the range and blocked the old trails leading from one horizon to another.

In the beginning, after the free or slave state arguments, it was cattle wars and townsite wars. Then one began to hear of sheep wars and fence wars. Punchers included in their regular equipment a pair of wire cutters. They had been accustomed to ride in any direction as the crow flies, country permitting; and to run against a barbed-wire fence which might force them to follow it for ten, twenty, or even thirty miles out of their way was something they would not stand for. They cut the wire and passed on, disdaining to mend the breach behind them. The fence owners patrolled the wire, a tacit declaration of war. The early days of the cattle industry in the West were not placid: they seethed, bursting into flame here and there, and the Law, being largely in books, did not run efficiently on the range. One code of the open range, however, did operate: it operated from the saddle, and was almost always present. Largely its arbiter, its judge, was force, and that force was rifle or Colt. The real law was custom, and custom was law. When Joseph G. McCoy started the trail herds northward out of Texas he also started other things that found expression in gun smoke and dangling rope.

Jordan was out of step, being about one generation before his time. He had clear title to his home range, an early grant, and on that home range was the water. Theoretically he controlled the water; practically, he controlled it only as long as he was strong enough successfully to repel aggression. According to the statute books he had a right to fence in his land; according to the law of the saddle he could fence his land only if he had men enough and guns enough. Popular sentiment would line up against him, everything else being

equal. In this particular case popular sentiment amounted to nothing, since his fence was a short one, blocking only one canyon at its narrowest place. A man, carefully picking his way, could get around it without much trouble; but it would tend to turn back cattle.

On the Tumbling L the fence was not a real threat, for the Tumbling L had water of its own. Jordan had water to spare. It was not just water which had urged old Fred to build that fence and to fly in the face of Providence: Tumbling L cattle, coming down for water, remained to graze on the choicest grass of the Three J, grass upon which Jordan depended for the fattening of his herd. This was the crux of the matter: On the choicest part of his whole range, his cattle were outnumbered something like nine to one, and in time would be forced back to the poorer grass, and farther from water. Also, the press of Tumbling L animals would put too many cattle on that part of the range, and in time would ruin it.

Mesquite drew up and stopped. The stream flowed lazily past at the foot of the hill. It was shallow, a few yards wide; but it ran steadily day and night, month in and month out.

"I don't hold with fences," said Mesquite, abruptly and flatly.

"But a man has the right to fence in his own land," protested Jordan quickly. "I don't grudge water to the Tumbling L, if its cattle would drink and go back again. But they don't: they drink and stay. Look at this grass, and then at the brands in sight. Count them!"

"I don't hold with fencin' in th' water on an open range," reiterated Mesquite with a growl.

"This is not open range; it's my ranch, and the title is good! It's just as much mine as this hat is!" retorted Jordan with a

little heat.

"I don't believe in fencin'," stubbornly persisted Mesquite. He let his gaze drift about, reading brands. "Huh! I don't see none of yore cattle: they're all Tumblin' L. Nope: there's one of yours, over there. **An'** there's another."

"Two!" snorted Jordan. "Fred counted them, one day, in this section. He made the tally nine Tumbling L's to one Three J. Nine to one!"

"Cattle shore will hunt water an' stay on good grass," replied Mesquite, slowly. "Reckon you built th' fence th' wrong way, John. It should be like a V, runnin' out from each side of th' canyon, an' comin' to a point on this side of th' crick. That would give their cattle a chance at th' water, but keep 'em off yore grass."

"And make Big John a present of a part of the most valuable section of my home ranch?" quickly asked Jordan in a rising voice. In the part of the country he had come from, boundary lines were boundary lines, and fences were right and common.

"Well, it is a puzzle," admitted Mesquite. "It may take some time to unravel it, too." He was looking ahead, scrutinizing the walls of the canyon as much as its floor. "Where is th' fence?"

"Inside the canyon, around the second bend, and nearly a quarter of a mile this side of my line," answered Jordan, leading the way.

"Might be a good idear if you kept a mite behind," warned Mesquite. Without conscious thought he shook the scabbards of his guns.

Jordan made no reply to the suggestion, but he continued to maintain the lead.

The towering canyon walls drew near and enfolded them in the shadows. They splashed along through the warm, shallow, and noisy waters of the little creek, and soon came to the place where it tumbled down from a ledge of rock on the left-hand wall. Mesquite looked at it and drew up again.

“Then it don’t flow right down th’ canyon?”

“No. It follows down a ravine on the left, that cuts back to the west. Farther up in the hills it runs along the base of a ridge and forks to the right. On the left, cutting through the ridge at a thin place, but on a little higher level, is what looks like it was an old creek bed. At one time it might have flowed that way and come down on the other side of the hills.”

Mesquite squeezed gently with his knees and the horse went on again. The first bend soon faced them, was even with them, and then fell steadily behind. The second, a few hundred yards farther on, looked ominous to a man familiar with man-made troubles of the cattle trade. A marksman with a rifle could be hidden in any one of a score of places and not be located except by his gun smoke: and usually gun smoke was not seen by the victim of the shot if the man who made it could really shoot. Vision dies with the rest of the body.

“Keep close to th’ wall, an’ behind me,” said Mesquite, drawing the Sharps from its case and placing it across the saddle. “Fence fights are bitter fights, John.”

They were not challenged. The fence soon came into sight. The posts of the finished part of it were standing, but the single strand of wire was tightly wound about a post on the

right. Three steers, heading down the canyon toward the water and grass, stopped short, watched the horsemen for a moment, and then, wheeling, ran lumberingly back again. Jordan's curses followed them.

"Looks like a reg'lar drive trail," grunted Mesquite, his gaze running along the ground. "They've worn it bare, right down to th' rock. H'm!"

Jordan's face was red from anger. He was staring at the bare posts as if he did not believe what he saw. It was *his* fence, standing entirely on *his* ground.

"Who did that, and when did they do it?" he demanded, his voice a rumble. He glared around the canyon as if he expected the walls to answer him. All they did was to echo his words and mock him.

Mesquite swung down out of the saddle and went on foot along the line of posts. Here and there he bent over and studied the ground. He soon returned and stood beside the saddle, his gaze ranging along the canyon walls. Usually they left a man, a man with a rifle-Ah: with Fred dead, and Jordan a helpless tenderfoot they did not believe that it was necessary to watch the fence. He remembered his companion's angry question, and looked around at the ranchman.

"Big John an' three of his men," he said slowly, his glance flashing back to a puddle of footprints.

"But you said he had been riding all night," quickly replied Jordan.

"Yes; he was; but this fence was torn down three days ago," he said, looking at the broken twig of a bush. "I'd figger it

about three days; anyhow, that's close enough. It was before Fred was murdered, anyhow."

"Then that makes it premeditated murder!" snapped Jordan, his face red again. "Well talked over, and then executed!"

"Mebby," grunted Mesquite, still looking at the line of posts.

"How do you know it was Big John personally?" asked Jordan, suddenly.

"That roan he was ridin' this mornin': is that his favorite hoss?"

"Yes. He almost always rides it."

"Right-hand calk missin' from th' shoe on th' off forefoot," said Mesquite, looking down at a patch of sand and clay. "Sometimes it's under th' boot-prints; sometimes, over. He was with 'em, at th' time."

Jordan's gaze followed that of his companion, and he could see the print in question, but it told him nothing.

"What am I going to do now?" he asked, angrily. "If those other posts would only get here **1**"

"Why, yo're goin' back to th' house, an' mebbly shave. I'm goin' with you, get my blanket roll, an' head east. I'll stop at Yucca an' ask about th' posts, if you want. I don't aim to be hard to find, no more. Who'll know about th' posts, anyhow?"

"Sim Trevor."

"Sim run a freightin' outfit?"

"Yes; but he won't be in Yucca unless he has brought the posts."

"Didn't see no house he could be livin' in," said Mesquite, picturing the buildings in Yucca. "What's he live in? Some kinda wickiup?"

"No. He lives over in Wagon Springs, that town to the east."

"Well, head for home, an' get that shave. I'll be pullin' out, I reckon. Anyhow, there ain't nothin' for us to do here."

"Can't we restring that wire?" demanded Jordan.

"I don't hold with fences on a cattle range. *You* can do what you want to."

"But if I don't fence, then I lose my best grass **1**"

"I told you it was a puzzle; but most puzzles can be solved," said Mesquite, mounting and wheeling.

"That fence, there, is the only way I know of solving it!" snapped Jordan, turning reluctantly.

"Yes: to solve one puzzle, an' make a bigger one," retorted his companion, grimly.

"What do you mean?" asked the ranchman.

"Fence wars are bitter wars. You'll have to match his outfit, man for man, gun for gun, an' then get th' best of it. There'll be dead men an' dead cattle. There'll be rustlin', too, right quick. As soon as th' news gets out that there's a fence war in here, th' off-scourin' of th' ranges will head this way, to pick up an' run off what you fellers will be too busy to watch or take care of."

"But what would you do?" asked Jordan, in desperation.

"Don't know. Wouldn't know until after I'd studied it quite some. Then I wouldn't do anythin' unless I could run it myself, without no interference from my own side. I'd need a plumb free hand."

"What do you mean?" curiously asked the ranchman.

"I've knowed a foreman or two who took orders from owners that didn't know half as much as they did. I'll ride back to th' house with you, get my blankets, an' head for Yucca. I aim to be in plain sight until time to ride on to-morrow mornin'. I'll leave word there for that Sim feller to hustle with th' posts. I'll do th' same thing in Wagon Springs if I don't see him in Yucca. If you leave that fence like it is right now, two men can handle yore cattle; build it up ag'in, you'll need nearer a dozen, an' you'll pay 'em gun-fighter wages."

"But my grass, my best range?"

"That's th' puzzle that you've got to solve."

"How would you like the job of solving it ^ ourself?" demanded Jordan.

"As foreman?" asked Mesquite, idly.

"Yes!"

"If I hired out to run yore ranch, I'd run it. You wouldn't."

"You're hired! Two hundred a month and expenses."

"I don't hold with fences. Besides, I told you, back in town, that two hundred a month was killer pay. I'm not that kinda killer." Mesquite turned sideways in his saddle and looked

squarely at his companion. "Killer pay means killin' by order, regardless."

"I don't quite understand you."

"A foreman of a ranch may get into a fix where killin' sorta follers along as a nat'ral result. He'll mebbby have to shoot his way outa somethin'. That ain't th' kinda killin' I mean. That kinda follers th' job, instead of leadin' it. Th' last place I worked I had to kill two, three men; but I didn't get my orders to kill 'em an' then set right out to do it. There's a difference. I don't know that I can explain it very well, but it's there, an' right plain, to me."

Jordan rode on in silence, his mind busy; and his mind was anything but mediocre. After a moment he nodded gently, to himself, and then faced his companion.

"I've caught it, Mesquite. What I want is a foreman, and not a paid killer. The two hundred dollars goes, as a measure of my need."

"But I've just left a foreman's job," protested Mesquite with a trace of vexation. "I'm a tumbleweed, Jordan; an' I mean to roll, an' keep on rollin'. I won't be picketed, hobbled, or branded. I'm ridin' on ag'in." "But if you stayed, do you believe that you could solve this problem?" demanded Jordan.

"Reckon so; but I can't tell you how to do it. It's a peculiar job for a particular kinda man. You ain't that kind."

"Can't you stay, solve it, and then ride on again? Perhaps it will not take you as long as you think." Mesquite could see the early morning light slanting in through a window, turning a mass of chestnut hair into a halo of glory. He could see that firm, small hand tightly pressed against a swiftly

rising and falling breast. This was no place for tumbleweeds to stay around. His jaw squared, and the icy glints returned to his eyes.

“No! I’ve stayed too damn’ long as it is! Haven’t I just told you that I won’t be hobbled or branded?”

Jordan’s perplexed expression did not clear, so he put perplexity to one side, and tried again.

“If you stay and solve it, I’ll give you a good interest in this ranch,” he said. “I could not afford to let such a man get away.”

“Damn you an’ yore job an’ yore ranch!” growled Mesquite, his eyes like scintillant frost crystals. “I just said *no*, an’ I mean it. Come on: you need a shave, an’ I want to get my blankets, an’ get to town, where I won’t be so hard to find. Jumped onto Jed when he wasn’t lookin’, huh? Let me tell you somethin’, Jordan: if things break like I figger they will to-night, Big John will find me; an’ if he does find me, some of yore troubles will shore be over. Some of yore troubles, an’ ’most *all* of Miss Sarah’s!”

Silence again. They rode on, leg to leg, each busy with his own thoughts. After a while Jordan grunted pessimistically and swore under his breath.

“The fence is my only hope,” he announced, looking straight ahead. “Aggression should always be checked at the start. It’ll save trouble in the long run.”

“Yeah? You build that fence, an’ see just how much trouble it’ll save you.”

Another interval of silence, and then Mesquite chuckled as he faced his companion.

"I said that I don't hold with fences," he announced, "an' I mean it: I don't; but we've both overlooked somethin'. We're a pair of fools, an' mebbby yo're th' biggest, seem' you've been here longest. As long as yo're dead set on buildin' one of th' damn' things, why not put it where it won't leave yore grass open to Tumblin' L cows, or keep their cattle from that water?"

"What do you mean?" asked Jordan in surprise.

"Th' crick flows through that canyon for three, four hundred paces," explained Mesquite. "Yore grass is outside of it. Run th' fence at this end of th' canyon, leavin' part of th' crick on th' other side of it. That puts water on their side of it, an' yore grass on yore side."

"I'd say that you've solved the problem very neatly," replied the ranchman. "Of course that means that I'm cut off from some of my home range; but it doesn't amount to anything, practically. I wish you'd change your mind and take over the running of the Three J, without interference of any kind from this side of the hills."

"No need for me to, now," grunted Mesquite, cheerfully. "With water on th' other side of th' fence, there oughtn't be any need of a two-gun foreman. I'm headin' east."

"Well," sighed the ranchman, "you know your own business best, but if you should change your mind at any time, you'll be welcome here." He again ran a hand over the stubble on his chin, and made a sudden decision. "I'll shave later. I think I'll ride in to town with you. I want to get word to Trumbull about the new fence idea, and leave instructions for Sim to dump off the posts at the end of the canyon instead of inside. I'll have to get two or three of the boys to start the work of setting posts and stringing wire, too. If I

hadn't had my mind so firmly fixed on the sacredness of boundary lines I might have thought of this easy and simple way to end the trouble."

"Yeah? Mebby th' troubles ain't ended, Jordan: folks out here have funny idears about fences. If Big John is honest about th' water, then I reckon he'll be satisfied; if he's got his mind set on usin' that grass, then he won't be. An' a fence is enough excuse, hereabouts, for startin' trouble."

"But, damn it, man: he has no right to the grass!" exclaimed the ranchman.

"Not none a-tall; not no right in th' whole, wide world," replied Mesquite, smiling coldly; "but some of these old-timers believe in free grass as well as free water, if both belong to th' other feller. You make yore play, an' let him make his."

They topped the last high rise and saw the ranch buildings squatting in the sun. A speck of white moved along the porch and into the kitchen. Mesquite frowned and renewed his determination to keep on riding. His companion shifted restlessly in the saddle, his thoughts torn from fences and grass and water by the sight of that white dress.

"There are some things that no fence will solve," he growled. "I ought to learn how to use a gun the way it should be used out in this country."

Again Mesquite saw that firm, small hand pressed tightly against a breast, and he swore under his breath. They ambled down the slope and loped across the flat. Had they known it, they would have postponed the journey to town: Riding behind them, and still between the walls of the canyon, came Big John a-woo-ing, formally to announce his intentions and to put the matter to the test.

They drew up and stopped at the porch, lazily dismounting. Jordan took his turn at the olla and waved his guest toward the door.

“Get your blanket roll, Mesquite, and we’ll be on our way.”

Mesquite stepped into the kitchen, his eyes slowly becoming adjusted to the poorer light of the room. Sarah Jordan was kneading dough, flour nearly to her elbows. She smiled and nodded. Mesquite nodded in reply and passed on into the dining room. In a moment he was back again, a roll of blankets under one arm. He stopped uncertainly, hardly knowing what to say. Sarah stripped little strings of dough from her fingers and added more flour.

“Riding on again?” she asked pleasantly. A few strands of hair fell down before her eyes and she impatiently brushed them back with a wrist.

“Yes, ma’am. I—I want to thank you.”

“I believe it is us who should thank you. Did you see the fence?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Jordan had entered the kitchen and was smiling at his sister.

“He’s solved a rather mean problem for us, Sarah,” he said.

“We’re going to build a new fence, in another place.”

“We?” she inquired.

“Yes. That is, the Three J. Mesquite’s riding on again. I’m going as far as Yucca with him, to see about hiring a few men to build the fence and to find out what I can about the posts.”

"I don't care whom the cattle belong to, John: they're entitled to water," said Sarah, with a show of determination. Mesquite sensed that an old argument was being revived.

"They're goin' to get it, ma'am," he said, smiling.

"Yes; but not the grass," remarked Jordan, quickly. "You all ready, Mesquite?"

"Yes. I—I reckon, Miss Jordan, that I'll say goodbye."

"Good-bye, Mr. Jenkins; and good luck. If you ever should pass this way again, you must drop in."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you."

The darkened door became light again as Jordan vacated it. Mesquite nodded to the dough mixer and followed the ranchman. They mounted and wheeled, and a feather of dust, dying out in the east, told of their passing.

Sarah turned from the window, brushed another strand of hair from in front of her eyes, and slowly went back to the dough on the table.

CHAPTER VIII

BIG JOHN TRUMBULL rode at a lazy lope across the flat, nodded approvingly at the well-kept, substantial ranch buildings, and glowed momentarily with the thought that all these, some day soon, might be his, or partly his. He was in a cheerful, expectant mood, for he thought well of himself and was, therefore, optimistic. Big John Trumbull was a man to reckon with in these parts. A clean shirt, greased boots, and a well-washed face and neck told of the unwonted trouble he had gone to in the endeavor to present himself in his best manner. His clean-shaved face gave him a

little better appearance than usual, and it was not much marred by the cut which told of a dull razor deflected downward by wiry bristles. He rocked past the corral, his horse swinging to its stride like a rocking chair and making light of the big weight it carried.

Swinging down from the saddle and taking quick steps across the porch, his bulk filled the doorway and somewhat robbed the kitchen of light. He squinted in an effort to readjust his retinas to the soft glow of the room. Sarah Jordan, halfway to the wash basin to remove flour and dough from her hands, stood rooted in her tracks, gazing with unbelieving eyes at this unwelcome and unexpected sight. For weeks her maneuvers had kept him at a distance, but now she sensed, almost with a feeling of sickness, that her cleverness had been for naught.

"Fine day, Miss Sarah," he said in a hearty, booming voice.

"Yes, it is," she replied, realizing the significance of his improved appearance. "Just like all the others," she added foolishly, to give her time to rally her faculties.

"Yeah. Just like all th' others," chuckled Big John. He slapped his hands together, rubbing them gently.

"If you are looking for my brother, he is somewhere about, but not in the house," she said. Pinto was in the stable. Her saddle was on the bar. It would not take her long to saddle up; but if the situation were as bad as that, the big bay would catch her in the first two miles. She could see the animal outside. It was his second choice in horseflesh. Still, there might be a chance. "Shall I see if I can find him?"

"No. No, reckon not," he answered, a broad, cheerful grin on his face. He was in the best of spirits and rubbed his hands again. "You see, I didn't ride over to see John. I saw him this

mornin'. I gave him a message for you, but later on I figgered I'd rather tell you myself. I come over to say that I'm right sorry about Fred; mighty sorry. I'm sorry he forced Jed's hand. But that's all done with, now. It can't be helped. You goin' to wash yore hands? Go right ahead: don't mind me.

"No. No, I'll wash them after—after you leave,"

she answered, putting them behind her, where she could clench them without betraying her fear.

He nodded, tossed his hat on the floor at the side of a chair, and seated himself. His face was somewhat ruddier than usual.

"I—ah—I been kinda watchin' you ever since you first come out here," he said, slowly. "There ain't nothin' purtier than a fine hoss or a purty woman. I've alius figgered that I traveled best in single harness, but I shore begun to have my doubts when I first laid eyes onto you. It didn't take me long to come around to realizin' that there ain't nothin' like a double-tree for pullin' life's heavy load. No, ma'am: it didn't take me long at all. So I kinda fixed myself up, an' here I am."

She had taken three slow steps backward and now stood with her back against the wall, between the table and the far corner. The door looked to be miles away, and she doubted if it would do her any good if she could win through it. The nails were cutting into her palms, and her throat and mouth were dry.

He reached down, picked up his hat, and punched a dent in the crown.

“Th’ way things are shapin’ up, there’s likely to be some trouble between th’ Tumblin’ L an’ th’ Three J,” he went on, with cool assurance. “Yore brother won’t let my cow critters get water. He put up a fence in th’ canyon. I tore it down. If he puts it up ag’in I’ll do more than tear it down. This ain’t fence country. There’s eight men on th’ Tumblin’ L. They’ll do what I tell ’em to. They’ll do anythin’ I tell ’em to. Savvy?”

She tried to swallow and nearly choked. A little, vagrant breeze, swirling in through the open door, brought from him a horsy odor that acted on her throat like an astringent. She tried to speak and could not. He took her silence for a guarded assent, and went on with his courting.

“Th’ Tumblin’ L has got th’ cattle. Th’ Three J has got th’ water, an’ th’ best grass for fifty miles around,” he continued, drawing his feet in under the chair as if about to stand up. “A fence war is a bad thing—for th’ weakest ranch. We don’t have to have no fence war. Luck is with us. Sarah, I’m a lonely man. I’m right tired of eatin’ a man’s cookin’. I’m tired of darnin’ an’ darnin’ an’ darnin’. I want a woman around th’ house, a woman to mend my clothes an’ keep things tidied up. I want a woman like you. By Gawd, I’m goin’ to have a woman around th’ house. There ain’t no two ways about it. There’s a minister over in Wagon Springs. It’s only a little more than sixty miles there an’ back, an’ we don’t have to make th’ round trip all in one day. We can leave word for John. Git yore bonnet or somethin’ while I saddle up yore hoss.”

“And if I refuse?” she asked, suddenly calm now that the danger was upon her.

“Refuse?” he asked, staring. He dropped the hat in his surprise. “Refuse?” he repeated in a louder voice. He found himself standing up. The word had been so unexpected that

for a moment It threw him off his mental balance. He stared at the flushed and angry face, nonplussed; and in that moment of indecision she > tried to pass him, to get to the door, no matter what happened afterward. The movement was all that was needed for him to orient Himself. His arm flashed out and he pushed her back again, and now he stood between her and the door.

John was riding into Yucca, miles away: John and Mesquite; and even if John should return and step in through that door, what could he do against such a man? He would meet his death, perhaps.

“Refuse?” bellowed Big John, the veins of his neck and forehead standing out. He took a step forward, both hands outstretched, and then stopped. “Refuse me? Refuse Big John Trumbull?” He laughed sarcastically. “Why, I’m th’ richest man in two days’ ride. I’ve got more’n ten thousan’ head. Yo’re makin’ a mistake, ain’t you? More of a mistake than you mebby know!”

It was strange, but in this moment she was thinking more about John than about herself. Her clean, straight, cheerful brother. He was as helpless as she was. Why hadn’t her visitor called while he had been here—he and Mesquite. She could see the young man’s shining leather, his glinting steel.

“I didn’t *say* that I refused,” she replied, trying to smile. “A woman likes to be won, and not kidnaped.”

“By Gawd!” muttered Big John, frankly and energetically scratching his head. He had lived with men all his life. A foolish grin spread over his face. All at once he felt that he was playing a new game, that he did not know the rules; but

he was quite certain, however, that he held good cards, and that the game would prove to be a very pleasant one.

“Not only that,” she continued, the strained smile persisting by sheer will, “but she likes to have time to think about it—to turn it over and over in her mind. It often means the difference between hatred and affection. Just why it should, I do not know; but that’s the way a woman is.”

“I was never much of a hand to put things off till to-morrow that could be done to-day,” he reluctantly growled. “I reckon that th’ fence trouble ain’t very pressin’. Yo’re right shore that you don’t want to go to Wagon Springs to-day?”

“A woman likes to have a new dress to be—married > in. As long as the matter of the *fence* can wait-” she broke off, flung herself against the wall, face buried in her arms, and sobbed until her body shook.

“Now, now!” expostulated Big John, uneasy as any man in the presence of a woman’s tears. He moved forward, rested a hand on her trembling shoulder. “Now, now! There ain’t no need to cry, Sarah! There ain’t no need, a-tall. I—we—I’ll wait awhile. Now, now!”

Here, Sarah: I-” He put his arms about her, and found a tigress slipping from his half-hearted grasp. Opposition sent a sudden surge of anger through him and, reaching out swiftly, he dragged her to him and kissed her twice before she tore loose again.

He took another step forward, around the far corner of the table, and again reached for her. The sting of her hand on his face startled him more than it hurt him, and before he could recover his wits she had darted around the table, through the door into the dining room and out of his sight.

There came a resounding slam, the crash of a falling bar, and silence, as he entered the dining room.

The red spot on his cheek was streaked with white, and the untrimmed hair before his ears was powdered. His flaring anger died down swiftly, and he stopped in the middle of the room, looking at the thick panels of the only closed door in sight. Sobbing sounded muffled from behind it. Such a door in such a house would take a deal of forcing; and there was no need to force it. A woman liked to be won, and not kidnaped. He had taken the wrong method in a game he did not know. After all, what was a day or two? And she wanted a new dress to be married in. Well, that was all right. He stepped slowly forward, almost timidly, to his own surprise, and knocked against the planks.

“Sarah! **Sarah!**” he called, his voice more pleading than commanding.

“Go away! Go away!” came the muffled answer.

“Sarah! Sarah! I just want to talk to you, through th’ door.”

“If you break into this room I’ll kill you with John’s shotgun!”

“Now, don’t you cry no more,” he said reassuringly. Damned if he wasn’t proud of her. She would try to shoot him, too, except that the shotgun was in his sight, standing in a corner of the dining room.

“Go away! Go away!”

“All right. There ain’t no hurry about th’ fence. You git yoreself a new dress, an’ I’ll pay for it. Don’t you cry no more. There ain’t no need for it. I’m goin’ now, Sarah. Be back in two, three days. Don’t you cry no more.”

There was no answer and, after waiting a moment, he smiled, turned on his heel, winked gravely at the shotgun, and strode from the room. Wasn't she a little wildcat, though? He laughed in his throat and stepped to the porch. He'd show her how *he* tamed wildcats if they were too wild. He looked at the bay, fresh and powerful. It was not as good as the roan, but it was a mighty fine horse. He'd give it to her when they were married. It shied suddenly as he reached for the pommel, and he checked his kick. He was feeling too good even to kick a horse to-day. The bay wheeled to face the north, but Big John jerked it around with an oath and spurred it into a gallop on the short-cut trail for town. He was going to celebrate and to tell the boys the news. He had always heard that women were strange creatures, but now he could testify that it was a fact. Again the spurs drove in.

CHAPTER IX

ADOBE walls are thick and their embrasures deep and shadowy, and, in the old days, they were small and few. The handmade casements were heavy and thick, and still more robbed the rooms of light. In many cases the color of the adobe, rough and light-absorbing if left unwhitewashed, robbed the poor illumination to make it poorer. In this big room in Yucca, where Tim presided, one wall was blank, and the doors in the two end walls were narrow and low. That is why Mesquite, sitting on a chair in a far corner, was not very noticeable: he was just a man without those details which make for identification, an effect enhanced by the sloping brim of his big sombrero. To anyone who came in from the blazing light out of doors he easily might be overlooked for a while.

Jordan was arranging for three men to build the new fence as soon as the posts arrived. It was the collective opinion

that the posts would soon be delivered, considering the time that already had passed. All the details had been agreed upon and the ranchman was about ready to leave, when the sounds of pounding hoofs were heard. They awakened expectancy even before they stopped at the door; and when they did stop there, all eyes were on the opening. For an instant a figure was sharply silhouetted against the bright sunlight, framed by the door casings, and then Big John, squinting to master the poorer light of the room, stepped inside.

“Hello, boys! I’m settin’ out th’ drinks to celebrate my- *Oh*, hello, Jordan,” he said, his voice dropping curiously as his eyes, more accustomed to the dim light, picked out the Three J owner. His mind was like a seesaw, tipping this way and tipping that: should he announce the news bluntly and bluster it through, or be reticent until he found his cue? Reticence was never a mistake along the frontier.

Jordan was puzzled by the expression on the newcomer’s face, by the calculating look in the pig eyes; but it could mean only one thing under the circumstances : fence troubles. In dealing with a man like Big John finesse was wasted, so the Three J owner opened matters by swinging a verbal hammer.

“Did you tear down my fence?” he asked abruptly, his voice low, the tones calm and unstressed.

Big John’s mind was still possessed by just one thought, and it required, something of an effort to substitute another. He studied the Three J rancher for a moment, his face devoid of expression.

“Why, now—yes. This ain’t fence country, Jordan; but even so, mebby I acted a mite too quick. I been right worried

about water. I can't have my cattle dyin' from thirst. Water's somethin' we've just got to have."

"Then it's only water that's bothering you?" asked Jordan smoothly, looking the Tumbling L owner squarely in the eyes.

"Shore! Shore, water. That's all, Jordan."

"It isn't grass, by any chance?" persisted Jordan coolly.

"Grass?" Big John's eyebrows went up to aid his expression of surprise. "Hell, no! I got grass: miles an' miles of it. But I ain't got water."

"Shucks," grunted Tim, mopping off the bar. He knew who was sitting back quietly in that far, dim corner of the room, and the knowledge somehow gave him confidence. "What about Antelope Pond, an' th' crick?"

Big John swung ponderously to face—and squelch —this unwelcomed prompting.

"Antelope Pond?" he cried, glaring. "Antelope Pond! *An' th' crick!* They both ain't only away up on my north range, but they're dry as powder, both of em!

"Damn' funny," said Tim, holding his ground. "Nobody ever heard of 'em goin' dry before."

That so? asked Big John, his voice beginning to roar. "You keep yore mouth out of my affairs! I ain't needin' no barkeep to tell me my business. You shut up, an' keep shut!"

He faced Jordan again, his temper ragged.

"I need water on my south range for th' cattle that run in them hills. I need it, an' I'm goin' to have it, too."

"Certainly," replied Jordan, smiling. "You're going to get it, Trumbull, because I'm going to give it to you. I'm going to make you a present of my end of the canyon. I'm going to build a new fence. This one will close the end of the canyon and give you the exclusive use of the creek from the canyon mouth to where it tumbles down the wall."

"Yo're what? Yo're goin' to run a new fence, huh?" bellowed Big John, his face several shades ruddier. He was fairly astride the argument and it threatened to run away with him. "There'll be no fence nowhere near that canyon! I'll tear 'em down as fast as you put 'em up—till I get damn' good an' tired of it; an' then

-Well, you better not get th' fence-buildin' habit.

That's a warnin'."

"Then it is really not the water that you are interested in?" persisted Jordan, his smile fading. "What you really want is my grass."

"Well, an' what of it?" growled Big John pugnaciously. "Free grass an' free water is my motter. I've alius stood for that an'-" He stopped, became

thoughtful for a moment, and shifted his attitude like a weather cock. The possibilities of the new conditions at last had hammered their way into his consciousness. With Sarah Jordan his wife . . .

"Look here, Jordan," he said in a gentler voice, the tones placating, "what's th' use of gettin' into an argument over a measly fence? In two, three days that'll shore settle itself. In

th' fust place there won't be no need for a fence; in th' second place- Well, let's drop this fool fence question until I ride over to see you, to-morrow or th' next day."

"The fence is going up, Trumbull, just where I said it was. You are welcome to the water, but not to my best grass. My south range is poor—nearly desert— and I need the grass along the hills. If you will just realize this it will save you needless riding. I can see no reason for you to visit me to-morrow, or the next day." "If you build that fence you'll only be tearin' it down ag'in, yoreself," said the owner of the Tumbling L, smiling. He glanced at the bottles behind the bar and wiped his lips.

"I won't; but perhaps you'll try it," replied Jordan, quietly.

"Me?" asked Big John, and burst into laughter; real, spontaneous laughter, and laughter without a trace of derision. He reached out his big hand and patted Jordan's shoulder. "You go right ahead, John, an' build that fool fence; but it might be a right good thing to put a gate in her—yes, sir! Put a gate in her!" Again he laughed, rocking on his heels in the full measure of his enjoyment. He withdrew the outstretched hand and hooked a thumb in an armhole of his vest. "Whenyou aimin' to put her up, John?"

"As soon as the posts get here. I'll hire two or three men to cut out all Three J cattle in that strip along the creek, and then drive the others into the canyon back onto your new range. The fence will keep them there." "You don't have to hire no men," chuckled Big John, again rocking on his heels. He was enjoying himself. "I'll send my boys down there an' throw over every Tumblin' L critter that's strong enough to walk; but you better put a gate in her, John; better put a gate in her!"

“My name is Jordan. There will be no gate. I’ll hire my own men to do my own work. That grass is mine and I mean to keep it. As long as the new fence does not shut your cattle off from water, water to which you really have no right, you should make no objections.” “Water! Water?” cried Big John. “What th’ hell do / care about water! I’m thinkin’ of free grass, John; an’ in two, three days you’ll be agreein’ with me.” He chuckled again. “You just wait a little while before you build that fence. I’ll ride over an’ talk to you about it. Now, we’ve shore had enough to say about fences. I rode in to town to celebrate, an’ not to talk fence. I’m settin’ out th’ drinks for all hands. Line up, boys! In two, three days there’ll be a Missus Trumbull on th’ Tumblin’ L! Fill up, an’ drink hearty.”

Jordan stepped back suspiciously. There was only one woman on the range. Little white streaks crept across his cheeks, and his hands grew into fists. He packed no gun, but he could hit, by God, and he would!

“You in th’ corner!” cried Big John, at last taking cognizance of the indistinct figure. The better light from a side window shone on his slowly turning cheek, and he found his invitation so suddenly accepted that it seemed almost like magic.

The man in the corner was on his feet, slipping swiftly forward, thumbs hooked to gun belts. The cleft chin was square and blue, the thin lips thinner. In the stranger’s cold eyes frost glinted. They were riveted on the high cheekbone of the Tumbling L owner, on the cheekbone and on the untidy fringe of hair hanging down on it.

“Where’d you get that flour, Trumbull?” demanded the stranger in an icy voice. The temperature of the room seemed to lower swiftly; anyhow, a man or two shivered.

Little prickles played along Jordan's spine. He was frozen into immobility, suddenly finding himself in an atmosphere of unbelievable deadliness. The room was hushed, the only sounds being laborious, cautious breathing, and the sibilant shuffle of the stranger's boot soles on the hard-packed floor. Big John's mouth gaped open and he was staring at the stranger, not knowing what to think.

"Where'd you get that flour?" insisted the cold voice. "Damn you, *answer!*"

"Flower? Flower?" asked Big John, his mind groping to get hold of this ridiculous idea. The man was loco, and deadly as hell. Flower? He was no schoolgirl, collecting posies! His face flamed suddenly. "What th' hell you talkin' about, an' who th' hell are you?"

"I'm th' man you've been lookin' for. Keep yore hands where they are! Answer my question: where did you get that flour?" The speaker was still moving forward, but very slowly, and the look on his face made Tim cross himself.

"I ain't got no flowers! Yo're loco!" replied the owner of the Tumbling L. Anger suffused his face, and he balanced himself, his shoulders slouching. The little crowd pushed backward toward the side wall.

Mesquite, his eyes not leaving Big John's, snapped a question at Jordan. He had stopped now, and he, too, was balanced, resting on the balls of his feet. His thumbs were still hooked over the gun belts and he was waiting for Big John to lead.

"Jordan, where did you last see any flour—an' dough? Look at th' flour on this man's face!"

Thoughts were scrambling in Jordan's mind. He looked from Mesquite to Big John. Against the redness of the coarse face he saw the white flour standing out; and he sucked in his breath swiftly. His sister's arms had been white halfway to the elbows.

"Great God! Sarah!" he cried, and then his voice dropped to a whisper. "Trumbull, what-"

"Yes, Sarah!" snapped Mesquite, interrupting. "She's slapped this dog's face! We're goin' back to th' ranch, Jordan, an'," he said through set teeth, "this man's goin' with us! Outside, Trumbull! Quick as you ever moved in all yore life—outside! You move a hand an' I'll blow you apart—an' I hope you move! Outside, pronto!"

"Why, there ain't nothin' th' matter with Sarah Jordan!" cried Big John. "I tell you she's all right!" he protested, and then his stomach constricted from the thrust of a gun muzzle. The blue jowls of the younger man were within a foot of his own face, and the gun pushed forward steadily, inexorably. One look into the shallow, cold eyes told him how narrow his margin was. He backed up, his pig eyes almost popping.

"Shut yore face an' get outside!" snapped Mesquite. "*You hear me?*"

"But I-"

"Shut up!"

"Come on, boys, an' bring yore ropes!" shouted a man near the door as Big John backed through it, feeling his way over the sill. "Come on!"

Jordan followed, tormented by fear. Behind him surged the little group, tight-lipped and grim. Tim was pressing on its

heels, urging haste. His own horse was out on the range and he would have to remain behind, but he was doing what he could.

The Tumbling L owner clawed into the saddle, silent, fearful. He had lived most of his life on the frontier and had seen men use ropes more than once. This eager group had always been afraid of the Tumbling L outfit, but what common sense they once had now seemed to be lost. Mesquite, gun in hand, swung into his own saddle, not for one instant losing the drop. Jordan mounted like a Jack-in-the-box. The crowd was spreading out to get its horses, and found itself wrapped in a sudden cloud of dust as three horsemen raced at a gallop down the street and out of town along the Three J trail.

It was a trail of agony for Jordan, a ride he never would forget. He tried to take the lead, to get there first; but Thunder and Big John's bay, the latter in the lead by half a length, made his efforts useless. On they swept, up the slopes and down again, the hoofs sounding muffled on the softer ground, and thundering on the hard. Behind them half a mile, losing steadily, raced the crowd. The roofs of the ranch buildings came into sight and grew swiftly. The upper frames of the windows moved up into view and the secretive wall became plain and large.

They pulled up in a whirl of dust, and Jordan was in through the kitchen door before his horse had stopped moving. They heard him calling, heard his shouts ring out hollowly, heard him battering at a door.

"You can move when you want!" said Mesquite in a whisper, his eyes mere slits. He had lowered his hand and the gun was back in its holster. Big John would get an even break if he had the courage to take it.

Big John made no answer, straining to hear a woman's voice, and fear dried his throat and made him try to swallow. Would she never answer! He was hardly conscious of the loud pounding of running horses as the following crowd drew near, eager and merciless as a wolf pack. Great God, would she never answer!

And then she did. They could not hear her, but the joy in Jordan's voice let them know. Rigid postures relaxed, and ready hands slowly dropped from belts. Then they heard excited talking. They heard a low, deep voice; and one of a higher pitch. The horses pranced and moved restlessly.

"I didn't dare come out: I was afraid he had not really gone. I was afraid of being tricked. John, oh, John: how glad I am to see you! How glad I was when I knew it was you, and that you were all right!"

"But you're sure that you're all right, Sis?" insisted Jordan. "You're sure?"

"Yes, oh, yes. But John: will he come back again? What will we do?"

Their voices were growing plainer as they slowly moved toward the door.

"He's back now, Sarah: with Mesquite."

Jordan stepped through the door and turned to lead his companion through in turn. He slipped an arm around her shoulders and held her tightly, and found that he could not speak.

Sarah looked at the frowning group in the rear, at the rope in one man's hand. She saw Big John and compressed her lips. Her eyes did not linger there, but moved on and rested on

the pale blue eyes of the youth behind him. He flashed her a glance and watched the Tumbling L owner with the same quiet, cold alertness.

"Everythin' all right, Jordan?" he asked.

Jordan stirred and nodded.

"Anythin' you want to say, Miss Sarah?" continued Mesquite in the same calm voice.

"No. *I—I—no!*"

"Hurt you any, did he?" persisted the youth, flashing a quick look at a bluish mark on her forearm.

She thrust the arm behind her, shaking her head. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw the man with the rope: he was re-coiling it with great care, and he put it back on the saddle. She caught her breath.

"What are they—going to do?" she asked in sudden panic.

"Nothin', ma'am," answered the young man with the blue jowls.

"What—what *were* they going to—do?" she persisted, her eyes wide with fear.

"Nothin'—but they didn't know that, ma'am." He hazarded another swift glance, this time at Jordan. "Better take her back in th' house, John."

Jordan drew a long breath, tightened the grip around her shoulders, and then, letting his arm fall, took her hand and led her in through the door, closing it gently after them,

closing it on the worst experience of his life. The silence outside seemed to thicken. Mesquite broke it.

He was backing Thunder slowly away from the man he was watching, which to Thunder's way of thinking was a damned-fool method of progress, and the horse made it plain. One yard, two yards, five yards, the animal restive and rebellious, and requiring strength and attention on its rider's part; but both were automatically administered, and not for even an instant did Mesquite's steady gaze leave Big John's face. The horse stopped, and the rider spoke.

"You've been lookin' for me, lookin' hard," he said, coldly, evenly. "Well, here I am, right in front of you."

Big John swallowed again and cleared his dry throat raspingly. It was one of the few times in his life that he had become acutely aware of his Adam's apple. It was out of place, and much too large. He swallowed again.

"Here I am," repeated Mesquite, thumbs hooked to gun belts. There was a tobacco stain on Big John's vest. It was the size of a half-dollar. Mesquite smiled. He'd always liked to shoot at a mark.

"I know it!" snarled Big John, a wave of red rising up from his soiled collar. "An' you got yore crowd behind you, too!"

"Yes; but if they're botherin' you, they'll go away. Shall I ask 'em to?"

"Hell with 'em!" snapped the baited man. He licked his lips. "There ain't been no harm done! Ain't she all right? Ain't she?"

"You'd nat'rally think so."

“Well, then: what’s all th’ trouble about?”

“Trouble?” asked Mesquite gently. “There ain’t no trouble—yet.”

“But she’s all right!” repeated Big John.

“Leave her out of it. You’ve been lookin’ for me. Lookin’ hard. You’ve been lookin’ for th’ feller that jumped onto Jed Peters, when he wasn’t lookin’. Here he is, right here. Are *you* lookin’?”

The Tumbling L owner said nothing.

“As you said,” continued Mesquite, smiling again, “there’s no trouble. I’ll give you a chance to make some, in yore own way. You’ve found me. Now pull a gun or get th’ hell off th’ ranch. It’s yore move.”

“Fine fool I’d be to pull a gun in this gang!” snapped Big John. His lips were dry again, and he wet them.

“Then clear out an’ don’t come back. If you do come back, come a-shootin’, for I’ll be.”

“I’ll come back, but not alone, by Gawd!”

“Suit yoreself, but come a-shootin’. Next time you find me—well, come in powder smoke. Now get!”

Big John glared at the group in the rear, the silent, watchful men he always had dominated. Every face wore a sneer, and someone snickered.

“I’m comin’ on to Yucca, too!” he snarled, his face working with rage. “An’ I’ll not be alone there, neither!”

A slim, red-haired man calmly shifted a generous cud to the other cheek, spat emphatically over his horse's shoulder, and nodded.

"You come a-shootin' there, too," he said, calmly. "We've done had a spell took off us to-day."

His companions laughed.

Big John wheeled, sent the horse all the way around, and glared at the pestiferous stranger.

"Jed Peters will be lookin' for you when his thumb gits well, an'," he finished, wheeling again, "you can all go to hell!"

They watched him ride slowly away, a deliberate slowness to preserve any lingering remnant of dignity which might be left to him. At the bunkhouse he sent the bay into a lope, but when he passed the corral the horse was going at a gallop. Dust swirled up high behind him, at times almost blotting him out; and then a rise hid him from sight. Somebody in the crowd made a profane and contemptuous remark, and Mesquite turned slowly in the saddle, a smile on his face.

"You boys better oil up yore guns," he said.

The red-head's grin revealed three missing teeth.

"Yeah," he drawled, nodding. "I reckon we got oil enough to go around."

His nearest companion felt for tobacco and papers, speaking while he searched.

"Don't reckon there's no likker on this ranch, huh?" he asked.

“Bein’ a stranger here, I won’t try to answer that,” replied Mesquite, and then he saw Jordan step through the door and move toward their end of the porch. All eyes were on the ranchman, and he slowly looked from man to man.

“He didn’t try to break down the door,” he said, which showed the tenor of his thoughts. The reaction had taken its toll. He was not as mentally alert, and he seemed to be very, very tired. “He’s just a damned fool,” he explained. No answering voice broke the silence, and he looked at Mesquite, sitting at ease in the saddle. “He’s just a damned fool,” he repeated.

“Not as big a fool as he might be,” said someone. “He didn’t pull nothin’ but his hoss’s head.”

Jordan was looking at Mesquite and paid no attention to the words.

“I don’t know how I ever can repay you, Mesquite,” he said, wearily.

“Then I’ll tell you, John,” answered the horseman, and for an instant the coldness left his face and something warm glowed in its place. “You can pay me a hundred a month, an’ found. You’ve hired yoreself a foreman.”

“Thank heaven **1**” said Jordan, and leaned against the post.

Mesquite smiled down at the ranchman, nodded, and then swung his horse about and looked at the little group. He raised an arm and pointed a finger at a red-haired gentleman who was regretfully caressing the rope at his saddle horn.

“What’s yore name?”

"Jim Baker. Why?"

"Want a job at fifty a month, an' found?"

"Here, with you as foreman?" asked Baker, squinting speculatively.

"Yes."

"Reckon so. When do we eat?" asked the new puncher of the Three J.

"You got a pardner here?" asked Mesquite.

"Yeah. Dirtyface, there. His name is Bill."

"You want th' same kinda job, Bill?"

"Yeah, reckon so," answered Bill.

"Can either of you cook?" asked the new foreman.

Jim Baker shifted the cud again, spat with vigor and precision, and grinned. The freckles on his homely face seemed to run together.

"Nobody but me ain't never admitted it yet; but I can make biscuits an' flapjacks, cook bacon an' bile coffee."

"He shouldn't bile th' coffee," stated Bill, shaking his head.
"Not nohow."

Jordan's mind was coming back to the situation immediately before him.

"Get another man for cook, Mesquite, if you wish to," he said. A wan smile crept over his face. "Bill is right about the coffee, too."

“Reckon mebbly I better,” said the foreman, smiling. “Us three will mebbly be too busy to do any cookin’.”

“I can cook, ’though I’ve already been hired to build a--fence,” said a voice.

“I’m doin’ th’ hirin’,” replied the foreman, shortly, and then added, “an’ yo’re doin’ th’ cookin’. What’s yore name?”

The new cook spread an apologetic hand.

“Davis Longstreet Beauregard Tompkins.”

“All right, Dave: yo’re th’ cook. Same pay for a starter, providin’ you ain’t gun-shy in a pinch.”

“I jest th’ same as told you that I’m a fighter,” observed Dave.

“Well, sometimes names are misleadin’,” replied Mesquite, grinning. “Who else has been hired to build th’ fence? Yeah? An’ you? All right. Go to Yucca an’ come back with th’ posts. Jim, you an’ Bill an’ Dave better ride back an’ get yore belongin’s. That’s th’ bunkhouse, right there.”

“We got our belongin’s on us,” said Jim.

“I’ll git mine later,” said the cook, kneeing his horse and riding toward the bunkhouse. First come got the best bunk.

The two fence builders still waited, looks of disappointment on their faces. One of them hitched up a belt and spoke:

“Hey, boss : ain’t you got no jobs for me an’ Henery, right now? There’s eight men in that Turhblin’ L outfit, an’ they’ll be fannin’ it to town.”

“I don’t know yet. You hang out in Yucca?”

"Yeah, we do. That is, we did. Seein' that we've been left kinda alone, we'll mebbly pull our pins an' drift."

Mesquite studied the lean face. Eight to two. He had taken the protection of their friends from them. Eight to two.

"Handy with a gun, of course?" he asked.

"Yeah, a little; if there ain't nobody shootin' back at us," came the answer from the center of a broad grin.

Mesquite studied the grin and the calm, frank blue eyes. The blue was a peculiar tint.

"What's yore name?" he suddenly asked.

"Th' last one I went by is Johnson. That's th' one that counts, because it's th' one I'm goin' by now."

"An' you?" asked the foreman, turning to the other man.

"Henery."

"It's too big an outfit for a thousan' head," muttered Mesquite, looking at Jordan. He had taken their friends from them and left them alone to face the possible anger of Big John and his outfit. Eight to two. It was not fair. There would be trouble during the stringing of the fence, and later. He found Jordan's eyes on his own, and for a moment the two men studied each other.

"You're doing the hiring, Mesquite," said the rancher. "But didn't you say something to me about man for man, gun for gun?"

"Yeah, I did; but I'm thinkin' about th' size of th' pay roll."

“Two more men will not strain it dangerously. I’ve changed my mind about the ear notches, Mesquite. I’ve nothing more to say about them, now that you’ve taken charge.” He smiled again. “That will mean more work, won’t it? I don’t like that eight to two any better than you do.”

Mesquite nodded, and turned to the two waiting men.

“We’ve got a lot of cuttin’ out, a drive herd to round up, ears to gotch,” he said, thoughtfully. “We can use you boys for a few months, anyhow; mebbe longer. Yo’re extra hands if you take th’ job. Forty a month, an’ found—with ca’ttridges.”

“Reckon it’s a lot healthier out here,” said Johnson, thoughtfully. “What you say, Hen?”

“Hell, yes! Come on, before they pick out all th’ best bunks!”

Mesquite sat quietly in the saddle, watching the last two men race toward the bunkhouse. He turned after a moment and found Jordan’s eyes on him.

“There ain’t no use to worry any more about *that*, John,” he said. “It’s all over, an’ Miss Sarah’s all right. Nothin’ like that will ever happen ag’in. Not never.”

“Never happen again,” repeated Jordan. A real smile broke over his face. “No. It never will, thanks to you. Still, I believe that I should learn to use a gun.” “Be time enough for that this winter,” replied Mesquite. “But there’s a better play than that, John.” “Yes?”

“Yeah. Miss Sarah oughta learn to use a gun. There’s plenty of time for that, too, now that there’s men in th’ bunkhouse. Tell you what: this winter I’ll learn you, an’ then you can learn her.”

“Good!” The ranchman’s eyes glinted and his face grew hard. “Winter is a long way off. You can begin my lessons as soon as you wish.”

Mesquite studied the lean brown face; probed deep into the ominous eyes, reading, reading.

“Don’t *you* be a damn’ fool!” he snapped, and wheeled Thunder toward the bunkhouse.

CHAPTER X

DAVE had done his best in the kitchen with the limited larder, and somewhat truculently promised better meals when he had obtained a better supply of the raw materials. The outfit was hungry, and hungry men are not so particular about variety. There had been plenty to eat, even if it had been three of the great B’s of the cow-country: beans, bacon, and biscuits. The fourth B, which is beef, was not yet available.

The new outfit of the Three J sat against the walls of the bunkroom, placidly smoking.

“Hell will mebbby pop when we start that fence,” said one of them, blowing through the stem of his pipe, which is a detestable habit in a closed room, although there were no rugs or carpets here to catch the dribble and to hold the odor.

“Shouldn’t wonder, Bill,” said his friend Jim, who was no stranger to popping hells. “Still, if Big John goes on th’ prod it’ll shore show up his hand. It’ll show that he’s after grass an’ not water. Th’ grass belongs to us, an’ I figger we’ll keep it.”

“Yeah. You figger right,” said Johnson. “Here comes th’ boss. I reckon he’s gettin’ things figgered purty close.”

Mesquite stuck his head in at the door.

“Any of you boys work in th’ last round-up of Jordan’s?” he asked.

“Yeah,” answered Jim, nodding. “Me an’ Bill an’ Dave.”

“All right. I’ll be back before you turn in an’ ask you some questions about it,” said the foreman, and turned to the cook. “You better hitch th’ wagon first thing in th’ mornin’, Dave. We’ll all ride in to town for supplies.” He thought a moment, shook his head, and corrected himself. “No. We can’t all go in. I’m forgettin’ somethin’. Somebody’s got to stay on th’ ranch,” he said, Big John’s flour-streaked face vividly in his mind.

Johnson’s thoughts were running the same way, and his killer’s eyes seemed almost to glaze over, to become opaque and to baffle scrutiny.

“Me an’ my Sharps will stick around th’ ranch, if you want,” he said.

Mesquite studied him for a moment, nodded, and stepped back. The doorway was again unobstructed. The new outfit sat in silence for a moment, and then Dave stirred.

“Seems like a waste of good powder, shootin’ at thumbs,” he said, glancing at Johnson.

Johnson sat back against the wall and smiled coldly.

“Third button on th’ vest is better,” he said.

Mesquite pushed open the kitchen door and entered the ranch house. The lamplight from the living room streamed, fanlike, across the kitchen floor.

Sarah Jordan was seated in an easy chair, close to the edge of the table, reading a book. It could not have been very interesting because she laid it down as the new foreman stepped into the room. Her brother, in another easy chair, was gently puffing at a pipe, lost in thought. He looked up, gestured toward another chair, and smiled.

"Throw your hat in the corner and sit down," he invited. "Roll yourself a smoke, and be comfortable."

"Are the men comfortable?" asked Sarah. "Did they have enough to eat, and can the cook really cook?"

"I'll give you th' three answers in one: yes," replied Mesquite, seating himself and dropping the hat on the floor beside him. "We're takin' th' wagon into town to-morrow mornin'. After that if they don't get enough to eat it'll be their own fault."

"I'll give you an order on the storekeeper," offered Jordan, starting to get out of his chair.

"All right, if you reckon we'll need it."

Silence enfolded the room, broken only by the scratch of the ranchman's pen. He handed the paper to the new foreman and again sought his chair.

"Anything on your mind?" he asked.

"Quite considerable," answered Mesquite. "It'll take time to straighten out most of it. Just now I'd like to have a look at

th' tally sheets, an' ask you some questions. You can write a letter to th' recordin' office an' tell 'em that yo're addin' ear notches to yore brand: both ears gotched."

"All right; but just what does that mean?" asked the ranchman, making a penciled note on the edge of a week-old newspaper lying on the table.

"Why, we cut straight down, top to bottom, just back of th' middle of each ear. Just cut off th' outside end of th' ear, back as far as th' middle, or a mite more."

"I see," replied Jordan, smiling a little at the shiver enjoyed by his sister. "It don't hurt, Sis—much." He looked back at his foreman. "And why do we do that?"

"Some folks get into th' habit of separatin' calves from their mothers, weanin' 'em, an' then puttin' their own notches on th' ears. When th' round-up comes, an' them yearlin's are branded, they are marked with th' brand that goes with them ear notches. This can only be stopped by watchfulness. It's called sleeperin', an' th' men of yore own outfit, findin' a calf that looks like it might get weaned too early, or off in some wild part of th' range where it might be overlooked in th' round-up, or a calf that has lost its mother, will do th' same thing. You ain't got any earmarks. That means you can't mark 'em before round-up unless you throw 'em, build a fire, an' brand 'em on th' open range whenever they are found. Lots of trouble, that is.

Some punchers won't bother to do that. A man don't like to ride around with a brandin' iron on his saddle, even if it is a stamper. Other folks don't like him to do it, neither. If he totes a straight iron, he'll likely get into plenty of trouble."

"How's that?" asked Jordan, intently.

“Straight irons are right handy for changin’ over brands. If I catch any outsider ridin’ around on our range with a straight iron on him he’ll wish he was never born.”

“But why cut off so much of the ears?” asked Sarah, trying not to shudder.

“Why, Big John swallow-forks, right an’ left. He cuts a V out of th’ tip of each ear. Say that one of his men feels like makin’ him a present of one of yore weaners, or yearlin’s that escaped th’ round-up crew. He just makes his V cuts, an’ when brandin’ time comes, that critter gets th’ brand that goes with it. He’ll be branded Tumblin’ L.”

“Yes, yes; but why cut off so much?” persisted Sarah, frowning.

“In order to make his swallow-forks he’s got to have th’ outside halves, th’ ends, of th’ ears to work on. Say that you make a split for yore earmark. He can easy change that into a V. But if that calf’s ears are gotched, there ain’t no place for th’ Y. He can’t make it, an’ you’ve saved that calf for yore own brand.”

“The situation being as it is, I’m strongly in favor of gotching,” said Jordan with a chuckle. His eyes twinkled.

“Thought mebbby you might be,” replied Mesquite. “You bought yore herd two years ago, huh? How many head?”

“I told you a thousand,” answered Jordan; “but I believe that the actual number was nine hundred and eighty.”

“Sell any?”

“Yes. Some steers and old cows. About ninety-odd in all. Fred wanted to put the money into graded bulls.”

“That was right; an’ it was right to sell ’em, no matter what you did with th’ money. You didn’t drive ’em up th’ trail yoreself—I mean Fred, of course?” “No. Zeke Wilson, over in Wagon Springs, makes up a trail herd or two every year from this part of the country. He does the driving.”

“What’s he charge you?”

“I am not certain, but I believe it is around four dollars a head.”

“Where’d he drive to? Montana?” persisted Mesquite.

“Standish, on the railroad.”

“How far?”

“Something like four hundred miles. Why?” asked the ranchman.

“Zeke Wilson oughta be a rich man by this time, if he’s been doin’ that very long.”

“Why, I believe he is fairly well off.”

“He shore oughta be. Well, once we get this ranch runnin’ right, an’ have things fixed up so we can leave it safely, we’ll do our own drivin’,” said the foreman. “That is, of course, if our herd’s big enough.”

“You’re both pilot and skipper of this ship,” said Jordan. “You do anything you wish.”

“Sell any head th’ second year?”

“Sold the steers that were marketable.”

“Buy more graded bulls with th’ money?”

“Yes.”

“Got yore tally sheets handy?” asked the foreman. “I’d like to look ’em over, if you have. If you haven’t, I’ll look at ’em to-morrow.”

Jordan glanced at his sister.

“You know just where they are, Sis?”

“In the top drawer, behind you. They haven’t been touched since you put them there.”

Jordan arose, and after a moment’s searching, found the sheets and gave them to the foreman.

Mesquite lost himself in the figures, and when he raised his eyes there was a look of satisfaction on his face. He was relieved.

“Nice figgers,” he said; “but th’ thing I like best about ’em is th’ way they’ve been sorted out an’ put down. They tell a man somethin’ almost at a glance.”

“Sarah’s the bookkeeper,” chuckled Jordan affectionately.

“But Fred told me what to write,” she said, quickly, her face clouding at that name. “All I did was to put down what he told me.”

“Nice figgers,” repeated Mesquite, smiling, “an’ I like what they tell me. At th’ end of th’ second year you had ninety steers, two hundred an’ ninety yearlin’s, four hundred cows, and three hundred calves. All told, you had ten hundred an’ eighty head. Accordin’ to my way of figgerin’ that’s just about what you should have had. That means, too, that yore cattle ain’t been rustled. We’ve got a good start, ’though

you'll mebbly lose a little money this year. Th' pay roll is too big."

"Well, a standing army always did cost money," commented Jordan, flashing a glance at his sister. "The security will be worth all that we pay for it."

"Yeah, shore will," said Mesquite. "Next year you'll make a little money; but after that it'll come in hand over fist. If we get an even break, you'll be a rich man in ten years. You got a mortgage on th' ranch?"

"No."

Mesquite sighed with relief. He knew and feared cattle-country interest. It was usually compound, besides being of generous percentage.

"You spoke about us making our own drives," said Jordan, suggestively.

"That's somethin' we won't have to think about for some time. We won't have many steers to sell for a while, an' it'll be cheaper for that Wagon Springs feller to handle 'em. That's what he figgers on, of course, chargin' like he does. That'll work itself out if we look after other things. I saw some of th' graded bulls up north, near th' crick. We oughta have more, but we'll wait till things clear up around th' north line."

"How many more?" asked Jordan.

"Five or six; but we'll wait," repeated Mesquite, his eyes growing frosty for the first time during the evening. "Th' first thing is th' fence, for we need it most—not that I hold with fences."

Sarah turned her head and looked at him.

"Do you believe there will be any trouble over the fence?" she asked, calmly; but there was a tenseness in her expression which both men read aright.

"There may be, with Big John bein' as he is," slowly answered Mesquite. "We aim to keep it up there, if any breaks." He glanced at her right hand, and unconsciously nodded his approval: he was willing to bet that Big John had felt it. He chuckled, his eyes on the shotgun in the corner. "That's why we got a five-man outfit, not countin' me, when we oughta have only two."

Jordan, struck by a disturbing thought, started to speak, suddenly decided to wait until he and his foreman were outside of the house, and had to change his words without a break so as to keep from arousing apprehension in his sister's mind.

"Are you going-" and was about to add "to town with the men to-morrow," but changed it with a smoothness which deserved congratulation. In place of that he said: "Are you going to take these tally sheets with you, Mesquite?"

"No, reckon not," answered the foreman. "I got a good head for figgers." Again he glanced at the shotgun. "If I need 'em, I can alius come up an' get 'em. You want to take good care of 'em. Well," he said, picking up his hat and getting to his feet, "I'll go back to th' bunkhouse. I want to have a little talk with th' boys before we turn in. Good-night, Miss Sarah. Goodnight, John."

"Good-night, Mesquite," said Sarah with a smile. Then her face clouded a little. "I hope—I hope the trouble will not amount to anything."

“Mostly noise, I reckon,” said the foreman, grinning, and trying to keep that damned icy look out of his eyes. To hide it better he looked away, his gaze settling on the double-barrelled fowling piece. Inwardly he swore at his choice and looked quickly away again, facing the ranchman. “Well, good-night.”

“I’ll go as far as the porch with you,” said Jordan, and then he laughed. “You’ll have the benefit of my protection that far, anyway.” He waved Mesquite ahead of him.

It was not yet dark outdoors, although the thickness of the adobe walls and the narrowness of the windows gave a good excuse for the lighted lamp in the house. They crossed the porch and stepped to the ground. Since Jordan had said that he would go as far as the porch, the foreman should have stopped there and waited; but he did not. Instead he strode slowly toward the bunkhouse, the ranchman at his side.

“I’d like to look in at the boys,” said Jordan in clear and distinct tones for the benefit of the ranch-house living room. Mesquite thought it was a little overdone, but said nothing about it.

“Shore. Figgered you might want to do that,” said the foreman. He laughed contentedly. “You’d reckon they’d lived there all their lives. They’re right good boys, too, I figger. Find that out when th’ pinch comes.”

They moved slowly forward, in step. Jordan had nothing to say about their respective strides, or footgear, this time. Halfway to the bunkhouse Mesquite stopped and turned.

“Well?” he asked, curiously.

Jordan chuckled and felt a little chagrin.

"I'm more than ever convinced that you are a remarkable young man, Mesquite. I thought that I had completed that remark perfectly."

"You did; but I was lookin' at you. Miss Sarah wasn't. What's worryin' you?"

"Are you going to town with the boys in the morning?" asked Jordan.

"Yes. That's one of th' danger spots."

"Must you do so?"

"Yes. I just said it's a danger spot, right now." "Of course I know how you feel about that, Mesquite ; and you're quite right in showing the boys that you are not afraid to go where you send them. They'll think more of you for it; but—eh—"

"Johnson is stayin' on th' ranch with a Sharps rifle," quickly interposed the foreman, reading his companion's thoughts. "If I've figgered him right, an' I'm dead shore that I have, this ranch will be right safe while we're away. A harpoon gun's a good thing to have, sometimes," he jabbed. "What you got in that scatter-gun, back yonder in th' corner of th' room?" "Why, shells, of course."

"Yeah, shore; but what load? What size shot?" "Fours, I believe."

"Swap 'em for buckshot," said Mesquite, moving on again. "I saw some buckshot shells on th' shelf. Miss Sarah know how to use that gun?"

"Why, yes: she's fired it a few times, just for curiosity. Wait a moment. I'm just wondering if it's the right thing to do—ah—there are delicate shades of properness—ah—damn it all!

Would the boys feel that I'm intruding if I looked in on them?"

"No; not this time. But I wouldn't make it a habit," answered the foreman. "Come on."

"Of course, I'll not stay long. Will you just look at those stars!"

"Let's get back to that scatter-gun," said Mesquite, who had seen stars all his life. "Miss Sarah has fired it. She'll know how to start it goin'. Th' beauty of that kinda weapon is that it don't take much aimin'. Put in buckshot, an' tell her not to be afraid to use it if she has to. Takes a damn' brave man to face that kinda gun—an' so far I ain't met none of that kind from th' Tumblin' L."

There came a sudden cackle, and then a clamor of cackling, from the distant chicken house.

"He's back ag'in!" exclaimed Jordan.

"Yes; an' he'll get them chickens, some night; 'less I get him first."

"Take a try at him, Mesquite," urged Jordan.

"Not now, John. This ain't no time for Miss Sarah to hear a gunshot. There'll be time enough to get him, I reckon."

"I've a deal of admiration for you, Mesquite; but my money is on that coyote."

"You got th' odds in yore favor, aplenty," admitted the foreman, moving on again.

CHAPTER XI

THE chuckwagon rumbled eastward over the trail to Yucca, driven by the cook, who was flanked on both sides by riders. *Rumbled* is hardly the right word: *rattled* would be better, and proof of this was soon forthcoming. Hardly out of sight of the ranch buildings, a tire came off, rolled a few feet, and slowly settled to earth in wobbly circles. Humidity is much cursed in some parts of the country but it has its value.

“Dried all to hell an’ gone, them felloes,” growled Dave, stopping the team. “I betcha—I betcha,” he said in frank pessimism as he climbed down from the seat—“I betcha there ain’t no-” His words died

as he opened the tool box and looked inside. “Nope: I’m wrong. There’s plenty here. Some’s already made, an’ some’s got to be whittled.” He took out some wood and passed it around to be shaped into thin wedges. The wedges already shaped he kept himself. A few coils of baling wire, one of the indispensables of the cow country, engaged his own attention. It was not long before the tire was in place again, wedged firmly by slivers of wood driven in from both sides and tightly wrapped with wire. The cavalcade started again, suspicious eyes now and then scrutinizing the other tires.

“We should-a known that, with th’ wagon standin’ out in th’ sun like it was,” growled Mesquite. “We had plenty of time to soak ’em overnight.”

“Been out in th’ open since last spring, I reckon,” said the driver.

“Well,” said Bill, rolling a cigarette, “we got a blacksmith shop. I can cut an’ weld a tire with th’ next man, if I have some help. I saw a stone, all ready for us.”

"You'll get th' help," promised the foreman, turning to look at him. "You said you helped old Fred in th' -last round-up," he remarked. "You notice much Tumblin' L sleeperin'? Anythin' you didn't like th' looks of?"

"Nope. Nothin' to speak of," answered Bill. He scratched a cheek, recalling some of the talk in the bunkhouse the night before after Jordan had left. "You figger we oughta gotch before th' fall roundup?"

Mesquite knew what was in the man's mind. It had been in his own. Such a job would call for an extra round-up, with plenty of hot, hard work. If the ear-notching could wait, it could be run in as part of the regular fall clean-up and save a great deal of time and labor.

"It's a big job," he answered. "If we start it, an' then have to stop before it's finished-" He became silent and thoughtful, and his companions knew the one thing which might stop such operations: trouble. He looked around slowly at each man in turn. "We'll build that fence first. Then we can ear-notch when we feel like it, unless we're too busy fightin'."

"I don't like fencin'," said the red-haired Jim, talking across the backs of the team. He was simply announcing his cowman's prejudice against wire.

"Neither do I," replied Mesquite, frowning. "I was dead set ag'in it, before I met Big John. I never fig-gered I'd be playin' a hand in a fence game. T don't like it; but it ain't only a question of water with Big John. We all heard how he talked, an' what he said. An' it ain't only a question of usin' good grass that don't belong to him, neither. There's another angle to this thing. Mebby you boys ain't thought of it. He's improvin' th' quality of his cattle at our expense; an' on th' other hand, makin' ours inferior. He ain't got a graded

bull on th' range, accordin' to Jordan." "That's right," said Bill. "We found plenty of Tumblin' L scrub bulls along th' crick, last round-up. Old Fred was itchin' to shoot 'em. Th' day's comin', too, when range bulls will be shot, or sold for beef." "Yeah, reckon so," said Dave. "All of Jordan's Durhams were up there close to th' crick." He looked curiously at the foreman. "You ain't overlookin' much, boss, are you?"

"No more'n I can help," growled Mesquite. "He's lowerin' th' quality of our beef, an' improvin' his own. Jordan spent th' money, an' Big John gets most of th' benefit of it. I figger to stop that."

"How many Durhams we got?" asked Henry, over the team.

"Eight," answered Mesquite, "accordin' to th' tally-sheets." He frowned again. "We oughta have five or six more. I figger one to thirty, for a start, would be about right. But if we don't put up that fence, we'll need a couple of dozen. One to thirty about right?" "Thereabouts," said Bill, nodding. "One to twenty-five is better. Let's see: how many cows we got?" "Four hundred," answered the foreman. "One to thirty will do. How many cows you reckon Big John's got on our grass?"

"A hell of a lot more'n we have," answered Dave from the driver's seat. He shifted the reins. "Old Fred said they was nine to our one. He counted 'em two, three times. It riled him considerable; but he couldn't do nothin' about it."

"We can," said Jim. "I reckon we just got to fence," he admitted, reluctantly. He turned his suspicious eyes on a tire and considered it thoughtfully. "An' what we *got* to do, we'll *do*, an' be damned to 'em."

"Big John's all cocked an' primed to spring somethin'," said Henry. "I been wonderin' why he ain't made trouble before

this. 'Tain't his nature to be a white man. I know *that* coyote, an' I know that outfit."

"He didn't have to while th' canyon was wide open," replied Bill. He laughed meaningly. "Why should he start trouble? Hell: he was gettin' water, grass, an' improvin' his cattle, wasn't he, an' all at Jordan's expense?"

"All them's right good reasons," said Dave; "but they ain't th' real, low-down reason, which we won't talk about a-tall." He gave intent attention to the team, and took it out on the horses. "Git ap!" he growled. "This here ain't no funeral!"

Every man in the little group knew to what Dave referred. It was not necessary to go further into the subject. They were picturing Sarah Jordan coming through the kitchen door, her hand in her brother's.

Bill glanced sideways at the quiet youth riding leg to leg with him. In his mind's eye he could see the flour mark on Big John's face, and he thought of the instant reaction of the foreman when that mark had swung around into his arc of vision. That had been quick thinking, and straight thinking. It had been even more, for to Bill it spoke of a man who was adept at reading sign.

"You handy readin' sign?" asked Bill, carelessly.

The trend of thought and of the talk instantly appraised Mesquite why the question had been asked, or rather on what it was based. He looked at Bill for a moment.

"Some," he grunted. "I oughta be handy at it. Th' Utes taught my Dad, an' he taught me by playin' kid games. They got him when he was a boy, an' raised him to a man before he had a chance to get away."

"Th' Utes was right good trailers; but I alius heard th' Apaches was th' best," said Bill.

"Th' Apaches were right good, an' th' best of th' Injuns at readin' sign," replied Mesquite; "but there was a few Mexicans that could beat 'em all."

"So I've heard; but they wasn't very many," responded Bill, "while every damn' Apache was a good un. Still, th' Utes was shore good enough. What band of Utes was it?"

"Mountain," answered Mesquite, and smiled at the knowing nods which greeted that single word. Bill had good reason to say that the Utes were good enough.

The roofs of the little hamlet were pushing into sight, and it was not long before the crest of the last ridge was reached and revealed the buildings in their entirety. They could see the front of the general store and the back of Tim's place, which meant that the tie rail in front of the latter was hidden from their view, and so told them nothing.

"Tumblin' L outfit square fighters?" asked Mesquite, motioning for a stop.

"They never got no medals for square fightin'," grunted the driver, his eyes on the town. It looked peaceful enough, but you never could tell.

"Stay here till I circle an' come in from their side of th' town," ordered Mesquite. "I want to have a look at that tie rail. I'll be in yore sight most of th' time. When I ride on in, you can start for th' store. That'll mean th' way's clear." He thought for a moment. "If I raise my hat, foller my trail an' join me."

He kneed his horse and swung from the trail at right angles, and he had been riding for only a few minutes when he saw the head of a horse swing up even with that of his own animal. He looked at the rider and saw the freckle-faced, red-headed Jim Baker, and he warmed to the man's quiet loyalty, a loyalty which must not be abused by rebuke. It was an important instant in the lives of these two men, an important and pregnant moment in the friendship which would grow up between them.

"Restless, Jim?" asked the foreman casually.

"Yeah; restless," grunted Jim, lying with deep gravity.

They pounded on, side by side, saying nothing more. Gradually they completed the quarter arc of the circle and cut the north trail, the trail which led from town to the Tumbling L, and perhaps beyond it. Mesquite gestured to keep his companion behind him, and rode parallel with the trail, studying it intently. The tracks of two horses were plain to be seen, here and there sharply cut on top of older prints. A rise in the middle distance hid the tie rail from sight.

"This Tumblin' L trail lead anywhere else but to that ranch?" asked Mesquite.

"No. It stops there," answered Jim, catching the drift.

"Then anybody ridin' on it towards town would most likely be comin' from Big John's ranch, huh?"

"Yeah," answered Jim, "an' from no place else. There ain't nothin' over that way to make a stranger head along this trail."

"Well," said Mesquite, smiling grimly, "if trouble's waitin' for us, we're even up in numbers, but in no other way."

"Yeah," said Jim, his own face growing grim. "We can ride right in, or circle an' come in on th' blind side of Tim's place. There ain't no winders in that south wall."

"Two men, with rifles an' behind mud walls," growled Mesquite. A man's mind plays strange tricks. At that instant he could see the olla under the porch roof, and bare forearms covered with flour. Naturally enough the next picture was the floury imprint of a small hand on Big John's cheek. She and Jordan were so helpless.

"We'll circle, Jim. Th' Three J needs us both."

"Shore," grunted the red-head with approval. "Of course, we don't know that they're that hostile; but I know that crowd--"

Neither man was afraid, and therefore took no pains to announce it. They crossed the trail and continued the circle; and as Jim glanced back over the course they had ridden, he saw the wagon and its attendant riders moving forward in a little cloud of dust. It was proceeding along the regular trail.

"Nobody could-a figgered that we rode on into town, could they?" he asked.

Mesquite turned swiftly in the saddle and looked toward the Three J trail. He chuckled and felt the light touch of pride. He had made no mistake when he picked the outfit for the Three J.

"That Tumblin' L crowd ain't got no idear a-tall just what they're up against," he said, cryptically.

"Not none a-tall," replied Jim with just a trace of pardonable pride. The new outfit of the Three J was becoming very closely knit. He was glad that he was a member of it.

They came to the main trail leading eastward to Wagon Springs and drew rein without a word. The deeply scored wheelmarks stretched eastward and westward as straight as a rifle barrel. They had been made by four-inch tires, and were spaced rather far apart. The hoofprints told them which way the wagon had gone.

“Southern gauge,” grunted Mesquite, thinking of the width of the track.

“Yeah. Sim Trevor’s wagon.”

“Haulin’ th’ posts!” said Mesquite.

“Yeah: reckon so.”

“If I was th’ kind of a man I Agger Big John is,” said Mesquite slowly, “I’d have a couple of men in town waitin’ for them posts. I’d either run ’em off to my own ranch, or burn ’em right here in town.” His gaze lifted and stopped at the far end of the trail. The front wall of Tim’s place faced the trail, and it had two windows and a door. Two men with rifles behind mud walls; but now there was a real reason to face them, which spells the difference between courage and foolhardiness. He shifted in the saddle and looked grimly at his companion, hoping that he would not have to give the order.

“An’ Sim’s an old man,” growled Jim. “We’ve been waitin’ quite a spell for them posts, too. I’m gettin’ tired of this damn’ circlin’. What you say?”

The answer was expressed in the quick beat of hoofs and a low and swirling stream of dust behind them. They rocked past a slight hummock, its surface disfigured by three long, narrow mounds of sun-baked earth. One of them looked to

be. newly made. They both glanced quickly at it, and then looked straight ahead again.

“He was a good feller, Fred was,” grunted Jim.

“Yeah; reckon so,” said Mesquite.

They shot down into a dry wash, and up the long, sloping cut in the farther bank. A hump of rock and indurated clay stood like a thrusting shoulder against the trail, forcing the latter to curve. It was even with them, and then behind them. An eight-horse team stood along the blind side of Tim’s place. Up to now it had been hidden by the bulk of the general store. A man was standing on the seat, a great bull whip coiled in his hand and raised level with his shoulder. It was a bull-whacker’s whip and a real weapon in hands skilled in its use; but it was much too long for close quarters.

Standing at the head of the lead team was a Tumbling L rider, now on foot. He was within range of the whip, but while he had one hand on a bridle, he rested the other on the butt of a gun, and thus commanded the situation.

A second man, mounted, was crowding the front wheel of the freight wagon, arguing heatedly with the teamster; and one of his hands rested on a holstered weapon. He was facing forward, his back to the street; but his companion, at the head of the lead team, was looking the other way; and this latter puncher saw

the two riders racing into town along the main trail. He shouted a warning, and the mounted man looked behind and instantly whirled. The man on foot sprang away from the lead team and, taking several short, quick steps, swung into his saddle. This brought his head well above the backs of the eight-horse team, and showed him something he did not relish: a careening chuckwagon and its mounted flankers.

He shouted again, whirled his horse around, and spurred by the team in an endeavor to gain the rear of the building and temporary safety.

The teamster raised his hand and straightened his arm. The great whip gracefully uncurled. Its long, strong lash flicked out and wrapped itself around the neck of the fleeing puncher; and the horse, suddenly freed of the weight of its rider, turned the corner of the building and was lost to sight. The puncher struck the earth on his back and head, and lay there like a sack of grain.

The chuckwagon rattled with ominous noise on the short street of the little town, and suddenly lost its rickety motion in the sharp shriek of brake shoes clamping onto tires. The two men on the Wagon Springs trail slowed quickly at the tail gate of the great wagon, one of them slightly in advance.

"How'd'y, Peters," said the foremost rider. The words were cold and clipped. He could see the white of the bandage on Peters's hand without directly looking at it. Peters still carried his gun in a right-hand holster; but that was not definite assurance that he could use his right hand with any smoothness. He saw that Jim was watching the prostrate man near the lead team.

"How'd'y," replied Peters with a growl, finding that he was now facing three more men, none of whom seemed to be friendly. He was raging inwardly at the perfidity of his friend, who had fled from the scene and left him to bear the brunt of the action alone. He had heard the warning shout and the quick beat of flying hoofs; and not having dared to look behind him, believed himself to be deserted.

“Wall,” drawled the teamster, his great whip again coiled in his hand, and his attention on the man on the ground. “Wall, Jed, now that there’s witnesses, you can take these posts away from me like you wanted to.” He spat deliberately over the wheel and addressed the victim of his whip, who was now stirring a little. “You tetch that gun, Jarge, an’ I’ll cut yore damn’ wrist off!”

Henry instantly left his companions, rode along the far side of the team, rounded the leaders, stopped and dismounted. He plucked a Colt from the open-topped holster and then helped its owner to get to his feet.

“Lean ag’in th’ wall, George,” he suggested, his eyes on the purpling welt around the other’s neck. A grin swept over his face and he glanced at the calm, unruffled and tobacco-chewing teamster.

“ *You* don’t need to tote yore gun, Sim,” he said, the tones implying congratulation; “but shore as hell yo’re goin’ to cut off somebody’s head some day if you ain’t careful with that whip.”

“I was right careful, Henery, *this* time,” replied the teamster. “I ain’t makin’ no promises, howsome-ever.” Sim’s thin laughter cackled and helped to relieve the tension.

Mesquite and Peters were regarding each other with level gazes.

“You still want them posts, Peters?” asked the Three J foreman.

“No,” growled the Tumbling L puncher.

“I hoped he’d change his mind,” said the teamster, “an’, by Godfrey, he has. He-he-he!”

Mesquite glanced at the speaker.

"Jordan says for you to unload at the mouth of th' canyon, instead of where he told you to."

"Yeah? An' who might you be?" asked Sim, plainly doubtful.

"I'm his foreman. Is yore team rested?"

"Rested? Hell, them critters don't git tired with no measly load like this!"

"All right, Sim. Get a-goin' whenever you feel like it."

"I aim to," grunted the teamster. His right elbow clamped the whip against his side as his left hand reached for the reins. In a moment a curling right hand grasped the short handle, and the long whip straightened out and cracked like a pistol shot above the heads of the leaders. Harness creaked, one wheel protested squeakily, and the great wagon rolled forward, dust threatening to engulf it. To most minds Sim's calling was humble; but to those who know, it was heroic. If one were to choose the great factors in the development of the West and cast them as silhouetted against the gray curtain of Time, the great freight wagons would be represented along with the stagecoach and the canvas-covered wagons of the immigrants.

Mesquite moved a hand in a short gesture.

"Load th' chuckwagon an' start back to th' ranch," he said. "Jed an' I ain't in no hurry, an' neither is his friend. We'll give Sim a chance to unload in peace."

The Three J riders swung around. The chuckwagon rattled backward and stopped before the door of the general store, where the proprietor awaited them with a broad and friendly

grin. He took the list from Dave's hand, squinted at it, and led the way inside the building.

"Take things easy, Jed," said the foreman. "You know, yore hand ain't right well yet. I'd hate to shoot a cripple."

"You go to hell," said Jed, and meant it.

Silence ensued. At some distance, and after a lapse of time, it was broken by the loading of the wagon. Then by milling hoofs and the clatter of the departing vehicle. One set of hoofs moved toward Mesquite. Henry drew up, a naked gun in his hand.

"I got George's weapon," he said. "You want it?"

"Give it to George," answered Mesquite.

"Give it to *him!*"

"Yeah."

"All right," reluctantly replied Henry. He maneuvered his horse with careless care, and stopped at the side of the owner of the weapon in question. He leaned over and slipped the gun into the holster, and under his breath he said: "If you ain't a damn' fool, you'll leave it right where I dropped it; but I kinda hope yo're a damn' fool."

"Oh, go to hell," said George, throatily. His voice was strained and husky, and he kept one hand against his neck. By this time the welt had assumed good proportions.

"All right; see you at th' canyon," replied Henry, backing his horse until he felt that he had plenty of room. George might be a damned fool. Then Henry looked at his foreman, and drew up. "You want I should stay here with you?"

"No. Go along with th' boys," answered Mesquite, shortly.

"You want I should send Jim back here?" persisted Henry.

"No. Go along with th' boys. When you get to th' ranch, tell Johnson to take his Sharps an' go along with Sim to help him unload. Tell him to stay out there with th' posts till I can relieve him."

"All right," said Henry, somewhat uneasily; "but if I stay here with you it'll make th' odds even." "That's all right, Henry," said the foreman, smiling. "I'll make them even, if I has to. How long does it take to get from here out to th' Tumblin' L ranch buildin's."

"On yore horse?" asked Henry.

"No. On theirs."

"About three hours," answered Henry.

"An' from th' Tumblin' L to our end of th' canyon?"

"About th' same. Th' goin' ain't so good, that away."

"All right. Get along with th' boys. If Jordan wants to know what I'm doing, tell him I'm herdin' coyotes, so they won't get th' chickens."

"You mean, tell him *that*?" asked Henry, scratching his head.

"Yes. Just that."

Henry looked a little doubtful, smiled tentatively, and turned his horse.

"I'd jest as soon stay here, boss."

"I know that, Henry; but I can play this hand alone."

"All right, Mesquite. So-long."

"So-long, Henry."

As the puncher rode away, glancing back from time to time, a silent spectator of the whole affair now pushed from the corner of the building, shoved himself out into the limelight, and made his presence known.

"Hello, Mesquite," he said, and favored the two Tumbling L punchers with a half-hearted smile. They hadn't done anything to him.

"Hello, Tim," answered the Three J foreman.

"You aimin' to stay in town very long?"

"Don't know till I get through figgerin'. Why?"

"Well, I just thought it's damn hot out here, in th' sun," said Tim.

"I can stand it."

"Yeah, I know," said Tim. "Whyn't you all come inside an' set down, where it ain't so damn' hot an' blazin'?"

"More room out here," answered Mesquite, shortly.

Jed Peters pushed back his big sombrero and rubbed the mark where the sweat band had gripped.

"Reckon me an' George will be ridin' on home," he said, experimentally; whereupon George showed sudden animation and pushed away from the support of the wall.

“Reckon you’ll stay right where you are, an’ keep me company,” replied Mesquite, coldly. “Both of you. I’m right lonesome.”

“What you mean, makin’ us stay here?” growled Jed, ominously, as if he did not understand.

“You know right well what I mean,” retorted the foreman, shifting to a more comfortable position in the saddle.

“By Gawd, if my hand was well-” began Jed, angrily.

“Mebby it is. If it ain’t, there ain’t nothin’ th’ matter with George’s hand, either of ’em,” countered Mesquite. A sudden thought struck him and he backed his horse until it was out in the street, beyond the front wall of the building. It might be that someone from the Tumbling L would ride in, and it would be well if he was where he could watch that north trail.

George became self-conscious. He glared at all three in turn, growled something about being tired of standing up, and cautiously seated himself on the ground, his back against the wall. He gently touched the welt on his neck and swore under his breath; but even then he did not become a damn’ fool.

“Whyn’t you take ’em out of town an’ turn ’em loose, Mesquite?” asked Tim, frowning in perplexity.

“Big John will learn about th’ posts soon enough after I do turn ’em loose,” replied the foreman, his voice edged by irritation.

“Oh,” said Tim, diffidently. He shuffled one foot, considered the tone of Mesquite’s voice, and nonchalantly drifted around the corner, whistling softly as he went. The whistle

increased in loudness with each shuffling forward step, and was abruptly ended by the hearty slam of a door which otherwise was never closed during daylight. Mesquite grinned.

“This is twice you’ve run a blazer onto me,” said Jed, throatily. “There won’t be no third time, after my hand gits well!”

“That’s right good news,” retorted Mesquite, smiling thinly. “You aimin’ to pull out of th’ country?”

Jed looked surprised, studied the words, and then spoke. His reply is unprintable.

CHAPTER XII

MESQUITE whirled past the bunkhouse and on **to** the corral. In a few moments he had unsaddled, turned the horse into the enclosure, and put up the bars. When halfway to the bunkhouse he met Jim Baker coming from it.

"Just gettin' ready to turn th' hosses loose to graze," said Jim, stopping. He made no reference to the events in Yucca. "You want I should rope you a fresh hoss before I leave?"

"Why, no, Jim. Thunder's fresh enough. I'm goin' to eat a snack an' spell Johnson."

"Shore," said Jim. "Th' boys found three spades, an' we been filin' 'em sharper. We'd just as soon go out there with you, an' work all night. Kinda got our dander up. There ain't no moon, but we could get quite a start in starlight."

Mesquite felt a pleasurable glow. Here was a new outfit, got together only the day before. A man would expect that it would take time for such a spirit to develop; yet here it was. Cowpunchers, willing to dig all night!

"All right, Jim. Take care of th' hosses, wrangle in a fresh bunch, an' stay here till Johnson comes in. I want a man in this bunkhouse every hour of th' day an' night. You boys all had your grub?"

"Yeah. Dave can sling it good. He's keepin' yourn warm. Yo're later than we figgered."

"Later than I figgered, too," replied Mesquite. "That Jed feller was so ornery an' anxious to get home that I kept him there longer than I needed to. How long will it take th' Tumblin' L

to get to our end of th' canyon? Say, if they start in about an hour?"

"Not before daylight to-morrow. Not till two, three hours after daylight," answered Jim. "Th' trail's rough as hell all th' way, an' th' canyon's dark as th' inside of a black sock, an' rough, an' mean, even in daylight."

"All right. Wrangle in th' hosses, Jim, an' then wait here for Johnson to come in before you leave. Here comes Jordan."

Mesquite strode on to the bunkhouse and found his supper on the table. Dave stood in the door leading to the kitchen. The other two were seated astraddle on chairs, their forearms resting on the top of the backs. They all seemed to be in a pleasant frame of mind.

"Heat up yore coffee?" asked Dave, grinning.

"No. I don't like it too hot."

"Have any trouble after we left?" continued the cook, his eyes telling him that the inquiry was foolish.

"No. They stayed put. Jim tells me that you boys feel like diggin' post holes in th' dark."

"Yeah, we do," grunted Henry. He changed arms on the chair back. "If we can't see to dig, then we'll be right there at th' first crack of dawn. But I reckon we can see good enough."

"You want I should put that damn' wire in th' wagon?" asked Bill, getting off the chair.

"No; not yet," answered the foreman, sensing that the owner of the Three J had reached the house and was standing in the doorway. "Puttin' up th' wire will be th' last thing to do."

We got to run a round-up out there an' throw over Big John's cattle before we string any wire. An' when we do string it, we *may* have to do it after dark. Hello, Jordan."

"Hello, Mesquite," replied the rancher, smiling at the wholehearted efforts of the diner. "You eat like a hungry man."

"I am a hungry man. We're goin' up to th' canyon right away. Jim is out wranglin' saddle stock. I've told him to stay here till Johnson gets back. Then Johnson will stay here, an' let Jim ride out an' join us."

"You can take Johnson, too, if you wish," said Jordan, grimly.

"Yeah?"

"Yes. I've loaded that shotgun with heavy buckshot. Hereafter if there's any guarding to be done on this ranch, I'm doing it."

Mesquite chewed in silence. He half emptied the cup and carefully set it down again.

"That's right good, Jordan, if you don't show yore-self. You can't stretch a shotgun load as far as you can a rifle. We won't be here when Johnson comes in, an' we may miss him on th' way. You can tell him I said to eat an' go back to th' fence."

"You have any trouble in town?" asked Jordan, anxiously.

"No."

"See any of Big John's riders?" persisted the ranchman.

"Yeah."

"And there was no trouble?" asked the ranchman in surprise.

“No. Sim Trevor damn’ near cut off George Somebody’s head with a bull whip, an’ George didn’t amount to much after that. Jed Peters was there; but his hand ain’t well yet. Somethin’ tells me that Jed’s hand is goin’ to take a right long time to git well an’ all limbered up.” He chewed another mouthful as Henry laughed knowingly. The coffee cup went back empty and Mesquite reached for the pot. “I’m watchin’ that bandaged hand right close from now on. Shove over th’ sugar, Dave. That’s right.” He stirred the coffee slowly. “That is, of course, when I meet Jed. I don’t believe in bein’ careless,” he added as an afterthought. He looked up to find four pairs of curious eyes on him, but it was Dave who put the thoughts into words.

“You reckon it’s hurt right bad?” asked the cook, putting reverse English on the question.

“Don’t know how bad it’s hurt,” answered the foreman; “but I can tell you somethin’. I could fix a bandage on my hand so it would look right convincin’ an’ not interfere with gettin’ a gun out an’ usin’ it good.”

“Well,” said Dave, sententiously, “there’s this much about it: them as are properly suspicious lives th’ longest.” He faded into the kitchen, nodding his head knowingly. His new boss was nobody’s fool.

Bill and Henry nodded to Jordan and went outside to see if Jim had returned with the horses. Jordan walked to the nearest chair, seated himself, and fidgeted, ill-at-ease. He knew what he wanted to express, but not just how to say it. He was worried about the trouble likely to arise out of the building of the fence, and not worried for himself. If one of these boys was killed . . . He squirmed a little and frowned.

"What's under yore hat, John?" asked Mesquite, pushing back from the table. He stood up, readjusting the belts and the hang of the holsters.

"What?" asked Jordan, sparring for a little more time.

"What's on yore mind?" repeated Mesquite, smiling.

"That damned fence!"

"Yeah? Shucks!"

"Yes; and no shucks. I don't like to think of the boys-If there's any trouble out there, Mesquite,

I'm going to be with my outfit. I'm not going to tell them to take risks that I won't take. I've got a clear precedent for that, too: you went in to town with them, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I did; but *I'm* th' hombre that's tellin' 'em to build that fence, an' you ain't," replied the foreman. "I'll be with 'em there, too."

"But you're acting for me!" protested the ranchman.

"Shore. I know that. That's what I'm drawin' down my pay for. You hired me to run this ranch, didn't you?"

"Yes; but I want to be out there with my outfit. I won't get in your way."

"Yo're stayin' right here close to Miss Sarah, with that double-barrel scatter-gun. Somebody's got to stay here, an' I need Johnson at th' fence."

Jordan swore under his breath, and then looked up somewhat indignantly at the chuckle. His expression asked

the question before he could put it into words; and before he could frame it verbally, it was answered.

“Yo’re hobbled, John: front, *an’* side line,” said the smiling foreman. “Likewise yo’re picketed, ear-notched, *an’* branded. Yo’re th’ brother of a right pretty woman. Yo’re hobbled; but me *an’* th’ boys, we’re tumbleweeds, rollin’ regardless. There ain’t nobody picketin’ us with a short rope. We roll into trouble, *an’* we roll outa it; but, by Gawd, we *roll*! You got th’ meanest job of us all: fightin’ a picket rope that won’t give an inch, *an’* before you get through you’ll mebbly find yoreself rope-burned aplenty. No, John: you stay right here, under cover, with th’ scatter-gun.”

“Damn it, Mesquite, I don’t like the idea of that fence. I don’t like it at all!”

“I didn’t neither,” retorted Mesquite. “I argued ag’in it, but you was dead set for th’ fence. If I’d been in yore place, I’d a-told Big John to keep his cattle to hell *an’* gone off my grass. I’d a-told him so damn’ plain he’d shore understand me. If he didn’t do it, then I’d shoot a few head. That would rile him up, *an’* I might even have to shoot him. I’d change *his* idears about fences. If there was any built, he’d do th’ buildin’, *an’* be right glad to. You can’t do that, bein’ a tenderfoot. Let me tell you, John, I don’t hanker for ice in th’ summer time.”

“I know it, Mesquite: you’re part of the country,” said Jordan, moodily. “I’ve got a notion to let his cattle go where they will. I don’t want any of my men shot.”

“Too late, now,” replied Mesquite. “When you start a war play you got to go through with it, or be walked on for th’ rest of yore life. If you quit on th’ fence *an’* back up, what th’ hell chance has Miss Sarah got? Sooner or later there’ll be a showdown. It’s just got to come. You *an’* me both know that

it ain't just fence; but we'll call it fence, an' play our cards that way. You talked me into stayin' to build it. Now I'm talkin' you into lettin' it be built. It's goin' up, an' it's goin' to *stay* up. It's goin' to stay up till Big John goes on th' prod an' meets me face to face an' reaches for his gun. That goes for Jed Peters, too. After that I figger it'll be all right for me to roll on again. These boys can handle th' Three J, after that." His eyes had grown frosty. He could still see the flour marks on Big John's ugly face. "Before I leave, this country's goin' to be right safe for wim-"

"We're all ready, boss," said a voice from outside the door. Steps stopped at the sill.

Mesquite whirled and faced the speaker.

"Jim back with th' hosses?" he asked.

"Yeah, an' th' leather's on 'em, includin' yourn." "All right. Tell Jim to saddle one for himself. He's goin' with us. Tell 'em I'll be right out, Henry," said the foreman, sliding his fingers along the lower edge of his cartridge belts as assurance about ammunition. He pulled his hat down more firmly on his head and swung on his heel to face the ranchman. "Well, John: stay inside th' ranch house with th' scatter-gun. Don't you let nobody or nothin' coax you out. Don't shoot *both* barrels at no hat. See you to-morrow."

"But I don't want the boys to get in-" said Jordan, and ceased, because he found that he was talking to himself. He got up, stepped to the door, and looked at the little group at the corral gate; and before he could make up his mind to any definite course of action, Jim Baker leaped into the saddle and helped to swell the dust cloud which rolled northward from the low mud wall.

He stared after them until the first rise hid them from view and then, walking slowly and thoughtfully, made his way to the ranch house.

His sister was seated in one of the easy chairs on the porch, and she raised her eyebrows inquiringly as he dropped into his own chair.

"Well, did you stop them?" she asked, a smile playing about the corners of her mouth.

"No; and you know it," he grunted as he looked around for his favorite pipe.

"Then the fence will be built?"

"Yes!" he growled. "Damn it, where did I put that pipe?"

"I'm glad of it, John."

He looked at her in amazement. Women should be on the tops of flagpoles, he thought, to serve as weathercocks.

"You're what?" he asked.

"Glad of it," she repeated, firmly.

"Yes," he grudging, slowly. "Yes, it's got to be built; but--"

Sarah Jordan was looking past the corner of the porch. She could see him standing there almost as plainly as she had before. The dark cold face; the frosty, pale blue eyes; the hard thin lips, and the blue-black jowls. She could see the low-hung holsters, ominous; the slick dark leather of his chaps.

She turned her head swiftly as she arose.

“John, I hope Big John tries to tear it down!”

He looked up from the pipe bowl and saw her disappearing through the door. The surprise on his face persisted for a few seconds and then died out from sheer hopelessness. He thoughtfully tamped the tobacco and struck a match. He knew that he had struck it when it burned his fingers.

“Well!” he muttered, and struck another match.

He reached behind him, found that the shotgun was where he had placed it, crossed his ankles, and pulled placidly at the pipe. Yes: he hoped so, too. And when she returned to sit with him in the twilight, she found him gravely “smoking” a pipe that was both empty and cold.

“Mesquite leave any instructions?” she asked.

“No. No, he-By George, but he *did!* He told me to stay in the house, with the shotgun.”

“Why?”

“Oh, so I’d be under cover.”

She arose and walked toward the door.

“Better come in, John; it’s getting chilly out here.”

“Huh?”

There was no answer, and no one to make an answer. He groped behind the chair, picked up the gun, felt for his tobacco can, and loafed toward the door. What was it Mesquite had said about hobbles, picket pins, and ear notches?

CHAPTER XIII

JOHNSON did not ride in to the ranch, because the outfit met him halfway to the canyon and he turned back with them, scoming hunger in the press of circumstances.

Small choice could be exercised in the location of the posts, for the rocky nature of the ground decided that question, itself. A twisted pinon, growing out of an earth-filled crevice in the west wall, curved out and up to parallel the wall, and provided an anchorage for the wires on that side. Where the next three posts should be set was bare rock, and no reasonable digression one way or another would permit digging. This problem was solved by building cairns of rocks around the bottoms of the posts. On each bank of the creek, however, the earth was deep enough for post holes, and they were dug and the posts set in them before daylight.

With the coming of light, the fence party split up and spread out, searching for more diggable ground. There were three spades, which meant three diggers, and which left three more men to build up the cairns as high as the lowest wire and to pile up stones for finishing them when the time came.

In the east wall of the canyon it was hopeless to try to set a post, but there were several perpendicular rifts in the rock, and it would be possible and practicable to wedge the wires in the cracks by driving in stones to hold them.

The sun slid into sight over the flatness of the eastern desert, and Mesquite, straightening his back, stood up and scrutinized the canyon. Far up on the eastern rim was a jutting ledge heaped with rocks of varying sizes. It was higher than the western rim, and commanded the canyon back to the second bend. It also commanded the line of posts. A man lying up there, armed with a rifle, would dominate the situation. He could be flanked, of course, in

time. That was something which would have to be thought out after the ledge was examined at close range. It might be too open to fire from the rear. If he and Johnson relieved each other, or even if they had to protect each other, the remaining members of the little outfit could make good progress with the fence and with the Tumbling L cattle.

Jim Baker dropped the stone he was carrying, eased himself into an erect position, and grinned somewhat ruefully. Despite the coolness of the hour, perspiration streamed down his face. He mopped up some with a sleeve and looked around.

"A feller reckons he's right hard an' tough, till he tackles some job he ain't used to," he observed, cheerfully. It was not meant to be either an excuse or an apology.

"Yeah," agreed Mesquite, slowly. "My back's near broke. It'll do all of us good to change jobs, I reckon."

"Round up Tumblin' L cattle?" asked Jim, glancing at his horse.

"No. Not exactly that," answered the foreman. "There's too many of 'em. It'll be easier to cut out an' drive back th' Three J animals. That'll leave th' Tumblin' L's ready for th' drive. They're nine to one, ain't they?" He looked around for Johnson, caught the man's eye, and waved the puncher to him.

"Johnson, me an' you'll play sentry an' garrison, an' hold th' canyon while th' rest of th' boys ride," said Mesquite. He raised his arm and pointed to the ledge. "That looks like th' best place, from down here."

"Yeah; but they mebbly can cut around us," objected Johnson.

"That's somethin' that'll have to be studied on th' spot," replied the foreman.

Johnson felt of his arms and back, and grinned.

"I ain't never worked so hard in all my life," he said, gently rubbing himself. "But we shore asked for it."

"We'll all be crippled, come mornin'," said the foreman. He was looking at the newcomer through half-closed eyes. "Let's me an' you do some climbin' to kinda limber up. Feelin' th' way we do, it'll be another hard job. We take our rifles with us."

Johnson nodded understandingly and turned to go to his horse.

"We'll just about have time, if them fellers have been ridin' as hard as they can," he said.

"Tell th' boys to start cuttin' out," ordered Mesquite, and followed his companion.

Hampered with heavy rifles, the climb took time; but it was accomplished. The ledge was found to command the canyon beautifully; but it, in turn, was exposed to a rear attack from higher ground.

"This looks like a job for two men," said the foreman, after he had recovered his breath. "They can climb th' wall farther back in th' canyon, an' cut around behind us. Make yoreself easy here, while I do a little scoutin'."

Johnson made himself a fortified nest by removing a few rocks, slid his rifle over the rampart, and stretched out in an easy position, the second bend of the canyon under his watchful eyes. With a Sharps rifle, at that distance . . . Well, he was not worrying about *that* phase of the situation. He looked around and spoke, but he found his foreman gone. He took a handful of cartridges from a pocket and placed them on the ground easy to his hand, and waited.

Mesquite moved swiftly northward, anxious to look down into the chasm beyond the second bend before the Tumbling L outfit could reach that point. As he advanced he gave his mind over to considerations of strategy. One hostile rifleman on the southern edge of the hill east of the canyon entrance could stop the fence building and the round-up until he was smoked out and driven back. There were eight men in the Tumbling L outfit, and surely one or two of them could elude him and filter through. He felt he could do the job if he were in their place. The burden of work was on the Three J; it had to go ahead to accomplish anything. It had to do the moving about, and to do it in the open.

He came to a gently sloping pasture, almost devoid of rocks. No man could cross this under rifle fire, which meant that Johnson would not be in personal danger from flanking; but the pasture could be worked around on the east and, the southern edge of the hill reached, from there the fencing and cutting-out operations could be stopped. If this threat was to be met and stopped, it would have to be done farther north, along the top of the canyon.

Mesquite clambered down a rocky bank and climbed up the farther side. He could see the rim of the canyon now, and he hastened forward. He slid down one smooth-faced boulder, worked around another, and came to a stop on the edge of the chasm. He looked over it cautiously. The walls were not

so steep at this point, and a man could easily climb up if left alone. About three hundred yards north of him the third bend blocked his view. Big John would almost certainly send a scout ahead of the main body; and he might do this even farther back. It was possible that he would dismount his outfit and gain the rim of the canyon instead of riding through the gorge into a possible trap. Once let that crowd scatter out and get under cover and the task would become something to worry about.

He moved as rapidly as he could, keeping just back of the edge. Soon the third bend was behind him, and

the fourth appeared, nearly half a mile farther on. The canyon was beginning to open out into the wide, shallow valley it eventually became; and the walls steadily grew more sloping.

At the fourth bend the chasm became sharply constricted, its east wall thrusting out like a huge, prognathous jaw. He could see the faint cattle trail hugging it closely at the bend. This would be about the kind of a place he was hoping to find, and it was good enough for his purpose. He increased his speed, and the last hundred yards were covered at a run. As he reached the tip of the thrusting cliff, perhaps a hundred and fifty feet above the trail below, he caught sight of a movement on the canyon bottom to the north.

He dropped to the earth, took off his hat and squirmed forward behind a boulder, and inched his way around flat on his stomach until he could look down into the canyon.

Eight men were riding at a lope along a stretch of comparatively smooth trail. Boulder-strewn ground slowed them up after a few moments, and they were forced into single file. Again gaining open ground, they bunched up and

came to a stop. After a few minutes' conversation they moved on again at a walk, arguing and gesturing. Some were for riding straight through and forcing the issue at the canyon's mouth if they should find the opposition there; others, for scouting out the lay of the land and proceeding with more caution; and still others were in favor of leaving their horses soon and climbing up the canyon wall to gain the vantage point of height. Then came the moment when they were almost immediately under the watcher on the rim, a situation paralleled countless times all over the West, a situation in which numbers were of small account.

A sharp order snapped out over their heads and they froze in their saddles, instinctively stopping. They looked slowly upward and saw the stranger's face against the stock of what looked to be a buffalo gun, at a ridiculously short range for such a weapon. Their first reaction was that of flight: to drive in the spurs and make a bolt for it; but second thought told them that such a move would be suicide. And another thought sprang into the minds of all: the man up above them might not be alone, and the first man among them to try a dash, or to reach for a gun, would die. In any number, in such a situation, there must always be a first: who among them would be foolhardy enough to draw fire for the sake of his companions?

"Keep 'em up, an' high!" came the second command from over their heads.

There was nothing to do but to obey. The man above them made a very small target: only his head was showing. Besides the rifle he was armed, they knew, with holster guns, and he had given them a sample, back in Yucca, of his handling of them. They grudgingly raised their hands a few more inches, narrowly watching for some mistake which they might turn to their own advantage.

"Big John," said the man above, "drop yore weapons on th' ground. I kinda hope you try to use 'em."

"I'll be--if I do!" snapped the Tumbling L owner,

"Drop 'em!"

Big John sullenly and very slowly complied, since he could do nothing else. The last to strike the ground was his rifle.

"Ride ahead half a dozen paces an' stop there," came the next order.

Again Big John obeyed, and stopped, swearing steadily.

"Peters," said the man above, "you do th' same, an' do it quick."

Peters said that he would be damned if he would, but he was doing it while he spoke, and he stopped by the side of his employer.

So it went, man after man, until eight weaponless riders were helplessly grouped anew, their guns on the ground behind them and out of their reach.

"All right," said Mesquite, standing up. "Now climb down outa them saddles, an' get away from th' hosses. I'm watchin' for th' first man to make a break."

Again there was nothing to do but to obey. Angry, sullen, cursing, they slowly complied and moved grudgingly away from their mounts. Urged by the man above to increase the distance, they did so. When they again stopped, at least a dozen paces measured the gap between them and the horses.

“All right,” said Mesquite, grinning despite himself. “Now step right out, an’ head for home.”

It took a moment for the significance of this command to sink in, but when it did, the group surged into fruitless movement. It had taken more than three hours to cover that distance on horseback; it would take them more than twice as long, at least, to cover it on foot. Tight-fitting, high-heeled boots are splendid riding equipment; but they were never meant for walking, especially over sand, loose stones, and rocks. It meant an ordeal of torture and might cripple them for days. They surged a little more.

“Quit that millin’,” snapped the Three J foreman, raising the rifle halfway to his shoulder. “Quit that, an’ head for home!”

George, the man with the welted neck, made the first step, cursing viciously. Man by man the others fell in behind him, also cursing. The last one to move took a few steps and then stopped, whirling about as if to make a dash for his horse. The rifle of the man above fell swiftly and a Colt leaped into sight, exploding once. The heavy bullet threw sand and stinging pebbles against the rebel’s legs, and he changed his mind before the smoke cloud thinned. Shaking an upraised fist at the master of the situation, he faced about and set out to overtake his plodding friends.

Then and there in the hearts of eight men bloomed the thought and the determination to wipe out this indignity in any way they could, in any manner that came to hand. The issue had grown: it no longer was ranch against ranch. Now it was man against man. No greater indignity, no more searing insult could be offered to riders of the range, than to set them afoot and make them walk. It was almost like a loss of caste.

Yet to Mesquite it was necessary to do this. He was playing for time, time in which to do his work without molestation. He watched them and waited until they were out of sight around the next bend, and then he slowly made his way down the canyon wall. There was no need, now, to worry about flanking, or about riflemen laying on the southern rim of the cliff.

It did not take him long to restore the rifles to their sheaths, to fasten Colts to pommels by the ropes hung over the latter. It did not take him long to swing into Big John's saddle and get the rest of the horses in front of him. They trotted along the cattle track, one or two trying to stray, but soon thinking better of it. He drove them ahead of him around the third bend, and then around the second; but at the second he raised his hat and held it at arm's length above his head. He wanted Johnson to have no doubts as to his identity. Johnson would be looking for enemies, his finger on the trigger.

Johnson was fretting. He had heard the sound of that shot as it crashed from one wall to the other and back again. The continuing clamor of it filled the canyon, and he did not know how many shots there had been. He opened the breech of the heavy rifle to reassure himself, and closed it again. Forefinger on the trigger, second finger pressing back the safety to set the trigger free, he waited. Again he estimated the range and slid up the bar on the great rear sight. Shooting down at such an angle was a puzzle. He twisted a little for comfort's sake and again let his cheek cuddle against the stock. And so he waited.

Time passed. Time dragged. There came the faint clatter of iron-shod hoofs, steadily growing louder and more numerous as the echoes multiplied them. It sounded almost like that snare drum he had heard at Fort Apache some years back. A

horse's head came into sight, and he tightened just a little against the trigger, which had no slack. The least additional pressure would set it off.

The horse, to his surprise, had no rider, although it was saddled. Another rounded the bend, and it, too, was riderless. He blinked, eased his trigger finger, and again tensed it: he was not so easily fooled. The third and fourth riderless horse made the turn; the fifth, sixth, and seventh. All right: there should be eight; and somebody was driving that little herd.

"By Gawd!" he swore, suddenly understanding. "They've took it afoot! They've climbed th' wall, an' are workin' around on th' hill!" There would be time enough to look out for that, however. He would wait a minute and see what else turned the bend. "Ah-ha! *There's th'-*"

The upraised hat checked the finger pressure. Johnson blinked again, lowered the muzzle of the rifle, and started unbelievably. Was it? Why, of course it was! The loud hail from the rider left him no doubt. Instinctively he slipped the safety back into the trigger notch, laid down the gun, and slowly stood up. The rider below put the hat back on his head.

"Where'd you get 'em?" asked Johnson in a roaring voice that made the canyon alive. The echoes died down to a mutter, and a man might be heard.

"Back aways," came the reply, also shouted.

"Back aways—aways—back—back—aways back aways," said the clamorous canyon.

"Why, damn it I Them's all Tumblin' L hosses!" yelled Johnson, stirring the canyon to frantic efforts. He had made a

statement of fact, based on unimpaired vision; but still he seemed to be a little in doubt. "How'd you get 'em?" he shouted.

"This canyon's worse than a parrot!" shouted Mesquite when he could make himself heard. He again waited for the echoes to die out, and then spoke. "Climb down here."

Johnson showed more eagerness than good sense in the speed of his descent, but he slipped down the last dozen feet and landed on the canyon floor without mishap. He had not yet sensed the true state of affairs, and was frankly worried. Anybody could pick up a loose cavvy and drive it ahead of him, but it gained nothing worth while. Instead of being down in the canyon, they both should be up on top, cautiously scouting.

"Lucky findin' 'em like that," he said, "but they're *only* hosses. We oughta scramble back on top an' stop them fellers as quick as we can!"

"They're stopped right now," replied the foreman. "They're on their way home, if they have any sense. Can't you see I got their guns?"

"Great Gawd A'mighty!" said Johnson. "Reckon

I'm moon-eyed. Will you please tell a man what th' hell happened?"

"Shore; but straddle leather," replied Mesquite impatiently. "I can tell it just as well while we ride. We've got a lot more time than we figgered on to make th' drive an' wire th' posts. Also, there's now two more of us to help with th' work. Why, it was like this . . . And he forthwith sketched the recent episode.

There was nothing miraculous about it, now that it had been explained. Johnson himself or any other man on the range could have done the same thing if he had thought of it. Johnson was turning it over in his mind when they swung out of the canyon and saw the dust-covered range and the blurred figures riding over it. The mounted men and the hurrying cattle seemed to be hopelessly mixed, although they were not. When his companion had said the last word, Johnson turned a mirthful face to the speaker, and then the mirth suddenly faded, and a grim expression took its place.

“That was a right good play, Mesquite,” he said, and right there his voice changed and became hard, and earnest; “but there ain’t a man in that crowd that won’t kill you th’ first chance he gets; and he won’t be none particular how or where he does it. From now on you watch yore ridin’ mighty close, Mister Man!”

“Reckon yo’re right; but it all comes under a foreman’s pay,” replied Mesquite. “Let’s jump in there an’ give ‘em a hand. If we work right hard an’ fast, this job oughta be all done by dark.” He pressed his knees and the horse sprang forward. Johnson followed him into the thickest of the dust.

CHAPTER XIV

LAMPLIGHT streamed through the kitchen window and marked out black crossbars on the yellow patch of light on the porch floor. A figure moved to and fro past the radiant rectangle, and a woman’s voice was singing. The black sky was pierced with myriads of stars, and off on the range a coyote howled.

Jim Baker led his companions to the corral gate, left them there, and rode on alone, his eyes on the lighted window, his ears missing nothing of the rich contralto voice. Jim did not know that the voice had been cultivated, but he did know

that he never had heard one more pleasing. As he swung up to the edge of the porch, the sudden glow of a fiery dot against the wall and the fragrance of tobacco smoke told him of the ranchman's presence. The seated figure stirred and removed something from across its knees, standing it against the wall behind him. Baker saw the soft glint of light on steel and nodded with approval.

"Mesquite?" asked the seated man.

"No: it's Baker," answered Jim. "Mesquite an' Johnson are out near th' fence. They Agger to stay out there, spellin' each other so they both can get a little sleep, turn about."

"But you don't mean that the fence is up?" challenged the rancher.

"Yeah. It's shore up."

"Any trouble?" asked Jordan, sensing that his sister was standing in the doorway.

"Not yet," answered Jim. "We've throwed over all th' Tumblin' L cattle we could find. Th' fence will keep 'em where they belong." He quieted the horse and after a moment continued: "We throwed over th' Tumblin' L saddle hosses an' piled th' saddles an' guns on their side of th' fence, back aways in th' canyon. They can find 'em without no trouble."

"You did what?" suddenly demanded Jordan, sitting erect. Sarah moved silently along the wall and found her chair.

"Piled 'em up, back in th' canyon, so Big John could find 'em," repeated Baker.

"But where did *you* find them?" asked the ranchman, mentally groping.

"Me? Shucks, / didn't find 'em no place, a-tall."

"Who did?" persisted Jordan.

"Th' boss. He shore made hisself eight real enemies to-day. If he don't look out he'll shore as hell-

Beg yore pardon, miss. That kinda slipped out."

"If he doesn't look out, he'll sure as—what?" said Sarah, ignoring both the slip and the apology. Her voice was a little tense.

"Get hisself killed, mebby," reluctantly answered Jim. He squirmed in the saddle.

"By whom?"

"Can't tell, miss. There's eight of 'em."

"Why?" she persisted, and her brother was content to let her assume the verbal responsibilities.

"Well, when a man's made to git off his hoss, an' turned loose to hoof it six, eight, or mebby ten hours, without no water, an' in high-heeled boots, why—well, he's just nat'rally goin' to git right mean."

"Your name is—"

"Jim, miss. Jim Baker."

"Well, Jim, you remind me of a dozen dust devils, each spinning along on its own course. Suppose you start at the very beginning and tell us all about it? All about everything

that has happened since you left the bunkhouse last evening?"

"Yes, miss."

"You're tired, Jim; and sleepy," said Jordan. "Swing down out of that saddle, have a drink to put more life into you, and then tell us the story."

"Thanks: but I'm all right. Reckon mebby I can tell it better sittin' up here."

'You've been in that saddle entirely too long," said Sarah, with incisive decision. "There's a chair, and John's got the bottle and glasses. You might just as well be comfortable."

"All right, miss, if you don't mind," said Jim, sighing a little as he dismounted. "I kinda got cricks in my back, he explained. "Diggin' holes an' totin' rocks ain't hardly my style. Boss says we'll all be cripples in th' mornin'; but I'm beatin' that: I'm a cripple right now." He laughed contentedly and slowly lowered himself into the chair. He settled himself cautiously and sighed with relief. "Reckon I got to get me a new rope, too. It's kinda frazzled, pullin' ag'in that wire."

"Yes?" asked Jordan, wise enough to let the conversation drift along naturally. "How's that?"

"Stretchin' that wire. You see, it oughta be tight. As soon as we found that it was anchored right strong, we just bent a loop in th' ends, tied my rope to it, an' threw th' weight of th' hoss ag'in it. You'd be right surprised how tight we finally got it. A propped-up wagon wheel makes a good rope stretcher. You run th' wire around th' hub, an' haul on th' spokes; but we didn't have no wagon."

"I see," said Jordan. He chuckled. "I'll wager it's tight!" He had seen cow-horses braced against the rope, with a luckless steer on the ground at the other end.

"We put up th' posts th' first thing," said Jim. "Couldn't string th' wire till we had all them Tumblin' L cows off our range an' on th' other side of th' fence. When you stretch wire with a wagon wheel you have to anchor th' wagon. But I reckon we done a good enough job."

"Did you have any trouble cutting out and throwing over the Tumbling L animals?" asked Jordan, leading the puncher back to the main track.

"No. We didn't have none. You see, we had more time than we'd figgered on, an' nobody bothered us, thanks to th' boss. Everythin' went slick."

Jordan, sensing that the story was about to be launched, said nothing at all, and his sister was wise enough to follow his lead, although she was very impatient; and so the story was launched, in Jim's own way, and went along without an interruption until it was finally told.

"An' that's all there is to tell about it," he said, in conclusion, reaching down to grope for his hat. "All?" ejaculated Jordan. "In God's truth, it's enough! It sounds—it sounds—"

"Incredible," prompted Sarah. She was leaning forward in her chair.

"Yes; all of that," replied her brother, shaking his head in wonderment. "Well, Jim: you're tired. Take this bottle down to the bunkhouse. Tell the boys to sleep until they can't sleep any longer."

“I’ll take th’ bottle,” said Jim, reaching out his hand for it; “but th’ boys will be up at daylight an’ in th’ saddles right soon after. Mesquite an’ Johnson are out there, holdin’ th’ fence. They’ll be hungry an’ tired an’ sleepy—more’n we are. They’ll be right glad to see us. Good-night, miss. Good-night, boss.”

He climbed stiffly into the saddle and swung around with their answering good-nights in his ears, and when he returned to the bunkhouse from the corral, and stepped through the door into the bunkroom, he held out the bottle to show what he had—and found that he did not have it at all. Dave had it.

Up on the ranch-house porch Jordan lighted another cigarette and looked silently northward through the darkness, picture after picture passing through his mind. And Sarah had been singing in the kitchen, something which she had not done for longer than he cared to think about. Then he saw the floury outline of her hand on Big John’s cheek, and a lean, leather-glistening figure slipping pantherishly out of a dark corner. He could even hear the soft whisper of leather holsters on leather chaps. Then the picture shifted and he could see yellow-white posts and strands of tightly stretched barbed wire, with a herd of cattle in the background; in the foreground, two blotted figures stretched out on the dark earth, one calmly sleeping, and one wide awake and vigilant. He sighed and flicked the cigarette butt through the air; and quickly glanced at his sister, waiting for her reprimand; but she was far removed in thought from consideration of litter around the porch.

She, too, was seeing a fence; but no herd formed its background. Its shining posts and rigid wire crisscrossed a heavy, ugly face; and on the near side was a mounted man,

the color of his shiny leather chaps the color of the walnut handles of his guns. A little sigh slipped from her, and it sounded so much like contentment that her brother leaned forward in his chair to see more clearly; but the kindly darkness sheltered her.

He cleared his throat, somewhat self-consciously, and moved in his chair.

“Well!” he said, heartily.

“Very,” came the quiet reply.

He chuckled.

“It sounded good to hear you singing again, Sis.”

“Do you still think I should go East?” she asked him quietly.

“No!” The word was explosive. “That was for Big John’s benefit.”

“Like the fence.”

“Yes. By gad, you’ve hit it. Like the fence: to *stop* him.”

“But it—didn’t,” she replied calmly. “Do you believe the fence will?”

“Yes! Yes, with Mesquite to back up the wire with lead,” he answered decisively, nodding his head in the darkness.

A star streamed across the night sky, and myriads of its brothers were gravely winking. The lights were out in the bunkhouse, and seemingly far away on the range a lonely coyote raised its voice in vocal profanation of the night. But you never can tell about distance when a coyote howls: it

might be close at hand. Again came the quavering, soul-racking howl.

Jordan stirred purposefully, felt behind him for the gun, and abruptly arose.

"Where are you going?" asked his sister, and then caught the glint of starlight on the barrels as her brother stepped to the edge of the porch. "What are you going to do?"

The calmness of her voice pleased him.

"Try for a shot at that coyote: there's no telling how close he is; and Mesquite swears he'll get the chickens." He laughed deep in his throat. "It takes more than a barbed-wire fence to stop that chap."

"And if you see him, and shoot, you'll wake up the men. They're entitled to their rest."

He considered coyote hunting from that point of view, and slowly returned to his chair.

"That's right," he conceded, replacing the gun against the wall. He felt over the table top, remembered that he had given the bottle to Jim Baker, and sank back at ease.

"Anyhow, we're not worrying about four-legged coyotes. When we do, Mesquite can take care of them, with that Plimsol weapon of his."

"Yes; I am quite convinced that he can," replied Sarah. "He does not miss ice in the summer time." She stood up. "It's getting too cool out here. I believe I'll go in."

"All right," he answered, and then paused while the coyote howled again. "Distance? You can't even tell how many there

are: that sounded like a pack.” He got to his feet. “It *is* cool out here. What’ll it be: checkers or chess?”

“Why, either, if you wish.”

“I don’t feel up to chess. How about you?” he asked as, gun in hand, he followed her in through the doorway.

“Well, John, I’d just as soon think—and talk.”

“Right! So would I.”

The canyon was a wedge of ink. The wires could not be seen in the dark against such a background. One post was barely visible. There was a strange, squareshaped blotch on the ground, just south of the invisible barrier. One half of it stirred to shift the strain to other muscles. Instantly the other half awakened and moved.

“You see anythin’?” asked a very low voice. It was not a whisper. Whispers sometimes suffer by being sibilant, and can be heard at surprising distances. Low, throaty tones do not reach so far.

“No,” answered the half which had first stirred.

“Hear anythin’?” persisted the other.

“Cattle,” came the answer.

The second half of the blotch sat up, slipping a blanket off to one side. He glanced up at the sky to learn the time. The stars told him, and winked.

“Turn in, Mesquite. I’ll strain my ears till dawn. Cup of hot coffee would go down right easy about now.”

“Shore would,” grunted the foreman, rolling first on one side and then on the other. He lifted his feet, jerked them, and let them fall again. The blanket enwrapped him like a cocoon. He slid forward a few inches, juggled the upper edge of the blanket with his chin, and relaxed. Then he was fast asleep.

There came a sound from the other side of the fence, and Johnson’s hand slipped downward. He saw a patch of darkness that seemed to be a little more solid than the rest of it. Another sound came from it, and it disappeared as the cow went back to find its warmed bed. Johnson’s hand came up again and rested on the other forearm, helping to hold up his chin. Off to his right came the murmur of running water, and more stars winked down at him.

CHAPTER XV

THE day following the erection of the fence passed without any further developments. The second day was the same. Mesquite began to get restless and very suspicious. Such tranquillity under the circumstances was not according to his experience. He had provided, as well as the limited number of his riders would permit, for every contingency. He had kept the fence guarded, and the ranch as well. Since Big John showed no disposition, so far, to raid the fence, then perhaps he was planning to strike a more serious blow. Dave kept to the bunkhouse, a rifle constantly within his reach; and with the cook was either Mesquite or Clem Johnson. The third and fourth days went by without any untoward incident, and the foreman made two trips to the fence, growing steadily more uneasy.

He swung down before the bunkhouse door and saw Dave seated on a chair, his back against the far wall. The cook was peeling potatoes, but he was placed where he could command a good view of the ranch through door and

windows. Johnson should have reached his friends at the fence by now. On the face of it, judging by Big John's character, any attack from him would not be made in the open; but it is good strategy to do the unexpected. The foreman idly felt of the cinches and found them tight, and for a moment his gaze, passing over the saddle, took in the ranch house and the big rear porch. Jordan's chair was empty, but Sarah was in her own, apparently busily engaged in sewing.

"Everythin' ca'm, as usual?" asked the cook, reaching for another tuber.

"Yeah; too damn' calm," growled the foreman, his frown deepening. He turned and looked in through the doorway.

"Waitin' for us to make th' first move," said the cook.

"Seems to me that we've made it," grunted Mesquite, ironically.

"Yeah, I reckon we have," agreed Dave. "Seems like it's their move, now."

"Yeah," said Mesquite. He was thoughtfully silent for a moment. "Dave, I got a notion," he said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Dave's knife began to move again, now that his lips were silent. Some people cannot talk and work at the same time. Suddenly he stopped peeling and looked up.

"Boss said somethin' about ridin' in to town," he announced.

"Did he go?" demanded the foreman, swiftly, a hand reaching out to the pommel.

"Yeah. He shore did."

"By Gawd!" swore the foreman, his frown growing. "I wonder--"

"If you'll wait till I get m'saddle--" said the cook, standing up.

"No! You stay here an' keep yore eyes skinned!" snapped Mesquite. Two thoughts were fighting it out in his mind; two possibilities, and he had to choose one of them.

"Mebby they're just waitin' for you to get away from th' ranch," suggested the cook, sitting down again and reaching for his knife.

"You mind-readin'?" demanded Mesquite. The cook had put one of the thoughts into words.

"But you've got to figger which, ain't you?" demanded Dave.

"Yeah! An' I'm figgerin' on goin' to town! With you here on th' ranch- Dave, get yore guns an' go up to th' ranch house. Get inside th' house an' stay there. Don't let nobody coax you out of it. I've got to guess one way or th' other, an' I'm goin' in to town. If they get Jordan-" He left the sentence unfinished, swung into the saddle, and headed for the ranch house. If they got Jordan! . . .

Sarah looked up from her sewing and nodded. The fine, mettlesome horse, eager to go; the lean, hard rider, with the glistening chaps, the great Stetson pulled down firmly, the ominous holsters. The picture was one to fill an eye. There was no need for her to go East.

“Miss Sarah,” he said, the words clipped in spite of himself, “I’ve got to go to town. Dave will be up here while I’m gone. I’ve asked him to stay inside th’ house. I’m wonderin’ if you’d mind doin’ th’ same?” “You must believe it to be necessary,” she said, studying him.

“Yeah,” he said, and then contradicted himself swiftly, and it was the contradiction which gave most weight to his words. “No; not necessary; but wise.” He quieted the horse. “I’ve got a lot of things on my mind. You. Th’ ranch. Yore brother. He went to town. Here comes Dave now.”

“John went to town?” she asked, one hand gripping an arm of the chair. “You believe he’s in danger?” “Don’t know. That’s one of th’ things on my mind. Yo’re another of ’em. Big John’s let th’ fence alone. He ain’t made a move. I’m right suspicious. Been trained that way. If I’d a-been put on foot, like them fellers were—Ah, here’s Dave. I won’t be longer than I have to. You *will* stay inside th’ house, Miss Sarah?”

“Yes. Please hurry—John may need you.”

The foreman smiled as the horse wheeled.

“Don’t reckon so, ma’am; but I’d rather be shore of it. Be back right soon, with John.”

She stood in the little swirl of dust, watching Thunder conquer distance with a stride that was a very beautiful thing. The rider seemed to be a part of the animal. She saw one hand reach up and pull the neck-kerchief around to the front, and then drop carelessly back to the rider’s side. So she stood on the very edge of the porch, leaning forward a little, her small hands clenched. John in danger? Yes. And Mesquite, too.

Her hands eased their tension a little. And Mesquite, too. That meant that others would be in much greater danger. She found a little savage satisfaction in that thought. At Dave's apologetic cough she turned, and he saw a shining face. What it revealed almost made him blush, and he coughed again to cover himself. Well, what could a feller expect, anyhow?

"Yes, ma'am?" he asked.

"What?"

"Aw—didn't you say somethin'?"

"No. At least I—hope not! Do you believe—John—to be in danger?"

"Don't know, ma'am. If he ain't in no danger before th' boss gets there, then he won't be in none afterwards. I wouldn't figger Mesquite in no danger, a-tall."

She looked closely at his friendly face, and saw that he had spoken the truth as he knew it.

"I believe you are right," she replied.

"Yes'm. That's somethin' you don't have to copper, a-tall, not *no* way. He's a' awful good man to let alone."

"You believe it's necessary for us to go into the house and stay there?" she asked, a little hurriedly.

"Foreman asked us to, ma'am," answered Dave, significantly. He stepped back from the door, politely waiting.

"Then we shall do it," she said, smiling, and walked past him.

When it came to closing doors behind him, Dave's habit was to use plenty of muscle, and to trust to the strength of the door, jamb, and hinges; but this was one door which he closed gently, softly, without any conscious thought about the matter. His mental haziness did not last very long: it cleared away the instant that he shifted the rifle back to his right hand; and for a moment he gripped it so tightly that his tanned knuckles threatened to turn white. If Big John felt like calling at the Three J at this particular time, why, let him, damn his soul! Let him!

Mesquite gave the horse its head, which Thunder took to mean that there were no limits save his own physical powers. He was tired of slowing every time a bush came near. The trail simply unrolled and slid under them. Coming to the last rise west of town, the rider turned and rode parallel with it, cutting across an almost imperceptible saddle-back, and heading southeast. At last the general store stood between him and Tim's place and, wheeling Thunder abruptly, he rode straight ahead, with the store as a bar to vision. As he neared the merchandise emporium he slackened pace, and the last few hundred yards were covered at a walk. Once under shelter of the building, he dropped the reins over Thunder's head, slipped from the saddle, and entered the store. The proprietor looked up casually, and casually spoke.

"Howdy."

"Howdy," grunted Mesquite, striding swiftly toward the front window. One glance from it showed him five horses at the saloon tie rail. Four of them were branded Tumbling L, and two of these wore pack saddles. His glance flashed along the side wall of the building, which had no windows, and rested on the far corner. In the background was the corral, and just to the right of its gate stood Sim Trevor's great freight

wagon. Mesquite whirled, strode swiftly to the proprietor, and stopped in front of him, looking him squarely in the eye.

"You neutral?" he demanded.

"Yep."

"Then stay so," grunted the foreman, hurrying on toward the rear door. Fifty paces to the south was a shallow depression which extended across the trail. If he took advantage of that, and crawled on all fours, he could cross over and approach the saloon from its blind side.

Jordan was restless from being cooped up too long on the ranch. Everything was being done for him. He even felt that they deprecated his shotgun. He sat on the edge of his chair, scowling at the ranch buildings. He saw Johnson saddle up and start off toward the fence, to relieve Mesquite. He himself had been told quietly, politely, but nevertheless positively to stay away from that part of the ranch. That was all right from the foreman's viewpoint, but it was rather hard on him. Stay away from *that* part of the ranch: huh — that was the only part of the ranch with any interest. He was tired of checkers and chess. He was tired of rereading the limited supply of readables on the ranch, and it would be another week before anything new in that line would be at hand. His horse had not been ridden for too long a time. That was a thought: he would saddle up and give it some exercise, and perhaps get himself into a more comfortable and sweeter frame of mind.

He stood up abruptly, plunged his hands into his pockets, and considered. Just ride around and around to exercise a horse. Damn this aimlessness. His fingers took hold of a coin, turned it experimentally, and ran along the edge. It was milled, and was the size of a quarter. It was a quarter, the

only quarter in his pocket. Yes: he remembered where he got it. He had won it from Tim at seven-up. There was a thought! He would ride in to Yucca and give Tim a chance to get it back. That would take the aimlessness out of exercising the horse. The thought became action. The slouch went out of his shoulders and the aimlessness out of his soul. As he strode past the bunkhouse he saw Dave carrying a bucket of water into the kitchen. Dave was a very formidable cook: he wore a gun on each thigh. Dave grinned, and Jordan nodded quickly and laughed.

Dave loafed to the front door of the bunkhouse and gazed out over the range, but it was mostly that part of the range which lay behind the corral; and when Jordan appeared leading his pet horse, Dave's gaze moved farther to the right and left. He was very innocent.

Jordan saddled up, mounted, and started on his ride; but as he drew even with the bunkhouse door something in the expression on the cook's face made him draw up. The horse didn't like to be stopped by the reins, and resented the indignity with mildness. Didn't his rider have knees?

"Well?" asked the ranchman, smiling.

"Goin' for a ride?" asked Dave, with placid dumbness.

"Yes." The horse sidestepped, pranced a little, and lifted both forefeet off the ground.

"Hoss needs it," observed the cook, critically. He evaded the rider's eye.

"So do I," said Jordan.

"Ain't goin' down on th' south range, are you?" asked Dave, with overemphasized carelessness. The curse of most actors is overacting, and Dave was not a professional.

"Why, no," answered Jordan, beginning to enjoy himself.
"Why?"

"Boss was a-wonderin' how th' grass was, down that way," lied the cook, glowing a little as he thought of how clever he was. He then proceeded to make the mistake of most poor liars: he began to elaborate. "Said he'd kinda like to have it looked over, when anybody had time to do it. I kinda figgered you might be going down that way."

"I see," said Jordan, speaking the exact truth. "Did he say just where, on that south range, there was any grass to be examined?" He was not in as much of a hurry now as he had been, and he threw a leg over the pommel.

"Huh?" asked Dave.

Jordan repeated the question and patiently waited for the answer. He liked Dave, liked him very much; as much as he could on such a poor acquaintance. He knew that Dave was loyal and that he had the interest of the ranch at heart; but he also enjoyed seeing him squirm a little.

"Come to think of it, he didn't say any place special: just south range," answered the cook, refusing to squirm. He knew that he held nothing in his hand; but that sometimes makes no difference to a good poker player, and Dave rather fancied his ability along that line. "No," he said. "He didn't say no place special. He don't know how poor that south range is."

"I'm going to town, Dave," said Jordan after a moment's scrutiny of the bland and innocent countenance of the Three

J cook. "That was in your mind, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, in a way," answered Dave, smiling sweetly. "I was just aimin' to ride in myself, an' get a can of bakin' powder. We use more bakin' powder than any man on earth would think." He scratched his head gently. "You'll be far enough ahead of me for yore dust to lay."

"I'll get it and bring it back with me," offered Jordan. He shook his head ruefully. "According to the list of supplies you boys got, a *man* would *not* believe you could use so much baking powder. Let's see, now: it runs to about a can a day, doesn't it?"

"Gawd! Them beans is burnin'!" exclaimed Dave, and popped out of sight.

Jordan moved his knees and became the front end of a streak of dust, and he was quite a distance on his way before he stopped chuckling. It was a hell of a note when every man on the ranch, from the foreman to the cook, both inclusive, tried to play wet nurse to the owner. They must think he was a child.

Sim Trevor was driving his great freight wagon across the little street, heading for the corral behind Tim's place, and the teamster waved a greeting; but he was so serious and drove with such obvious care that even a tenderfoot could see that he had something on his mind.

Jordan dismounted at the tie rail, dropped the reins over it, and stepped inside the building. The coolness of the big room was pleasing.

"Hello, Tim. I brought back that quarter."

"Quarter?"

"All right, then: two-bit piece, if you believe that sounds better."

"Yeah? What two-bit piece?"

"The one that represents your scalp. If you believe that you know enough about seven-up to win it back again, it's yours."

"Yep; it shore is," said Tim, slipping from behind the bar. "Didn't I hear Sim's wagon, just now?"

"Yes. I just met him, outside. Wait till he comes in and I'll buy. Everything been peaceful here in town?"

"Yeah," said Tim, slowly, as he regarded the lean face. "Yeah," he repeated, "but I'm keepin' my fingers crossed. Here comes Sim now, I reckon," he said, listening to the slow, heavy step.

The teamster entered the room, brushed alkali dust from his shoulders, and headed for the bar; but Jordan's call and his upraised hand swerved him, and he plumped himself down on a chair at the table.

"Phew!" he sighed, taking off his hat and dropping it on the floor.

"Hot?" asked Tim.

"No; not special; but I *shore* need a drink. Mebby two of 'em. Mebby even *three* of 'em. I alius like a heavy load in that wagon; she was built for 'em. Besides, there ain't no money in makin' light hauls. I was paid double for *this* load, but I'll never carry another one like it while I have my senses. Not never!"

Tim, having obeyed Jordan's gesture, placed a bottle and three glasses on the table.

"Pour yore own, an' no holds barred," he said. He waited, filled his own glass, and had it halfway to his lips when he stopped his hand, looked curiously at the teamster, and then downed the drink. Jordan, too, had noticed the shaking hand that slopped the liquor high up against the sides of the teamster's glass.

"What's the matter, Sim?" asked the latter, curiously. "Not sick, are you?"

"No-o; I ain't sick," answered the teamster, pushing the bottle toward the ranchman. He motioned impatiently. "Fill 'er ag'in, on me." He rubbed the mark of the sweatband on his forehead and sighed once more. He almost grabbed the bottle from Tim's hand as the latter put it down on the table. "Thirty miles, settin' on th' very front edge of that seat, not knowin' what minute- Kinda strain, I say. Here's how!"

He dragged a sleeve across his lips and sighed again. "Anybody from th' Tumblin' L been in here lookin' for me?" he asked.

Tim and Jordan exchanged quick looks, their curiosity satisfied by the implication in that question. They both knew about the use he had made of his great whip on the occasion of his last visit. It was only natural for him to fear the vengeance of the victim of that play. Then Tim became quietly thoughtful: he knew Sim Trevor, and he knew that the old man feared nothing on two legs, or four, either, for that matter. What was it he had said about sitting on the front edge of the seat?

"You figger George is on th' prod ag'in you?" he asked, experimentally, closely watching.

“George? *George* on th’ prod ag’in *me*?” demanded the old man sharply. “Well, let him git on it, an’ off’n it, if he wants; an’ th’ faster he gits off’n it, th’ better for his hide! *George!*” he sneered. “I was skinnin’ buf-faler afore he was borned, an’ holdin’ my own in th’ toughest honkatonks on th’ old frontier. *George!*” He drew a pipe and a sack of tobacco from a pocket and spilled the grains over the edges of the bowl. “There was somebody from th’ Tumblin’ L goin’ to meet me here an’ unload my wagon; but I got th’ team unhitched an’ far enough away from it, I reckon. If they don’t git here, then that load stays right where it is, by Godfrey! I’ve done all th’ sweatin’ *I’m* goin’ to do over that damn’ load.”

“What th’ hell you got in it?” asked Tim. “Mounting lions?”

“Mounting lions!” repeated Sim with heavy sarcasm. He struck a match and lit the pipe, his fingers a little steadier; but as his eyes focused on the tiny flame he became aware of his trembling fingers and of what lay behind his companions’ words. “Jest gittin’ old, I reckon; though I never could abide dynamite, even in my younger days. Joltin’ along in that wagon for over thirty mile of bumpy trail—well, I’m right glad it’s over. Them Tumblin’ L fellers are shore welcome to pack it in th’ rest of th’ way, an’ I hope it’s Jed Peters an’ George that does th’ packin’. Then if she blows up there won’t be no harm done. You git that fence up all right, Jordan?” he asked.

“Yes. The boys went right at it. It’s all done.”

“Like to see anybody string barb’ wire across a range of mine!” snorted Sim, pugnaciously. “Take th’ standin’ army to keep a fence up, over Wagon Springs way. Big John should-a ripped it out by th’ roots. Don’t know what this country’s comin’ to, with men gittin’ like they are. Serves Big John right, I reckon, if he ain’t got guts enough to fight wire.”

“He tried to,” admitted Jordan, smiling; “but Mesquite took their guns away and made them walk all the way home from the canyon.”

“He *did*? Walk home? Walk from that canyon mouth back to th’ Tumblin’ L ranch houses? Great Godfrey! I’d say Big John an’ his gang ain’t got guts enough for to stuff a Lucca moth!” His expression was one of utter amazement. “What’s he *done* about it?”

“Nothing, yet, so far as we know,” answered the ranchman.

“Great Godfrey! But he *will*, Jordan! He’s *gotta*! He can’t live out in this country with a thing like that pinned onto him! Hah! Reckon he’s slyer than I gave him credit for. You just watch : he’s gotta !”

“Here comes yore Tumblin’ L hombres, follerin’ a couple pack hosses,” said Tim, looking out of the window. He flashed a quick glance at the ranchman. “Jordan, you shouldn’t be here. I wish . . His voice trailed off into nothing.

“But I don’t pack a gun,” replied the rancher, quietly.

“Great Godfrey!” shouted Sim. “You give him one, right quick, Tim!”

“No. I was told that would be suicide,” said Jordan.

“Yep. That’s right. Would be,” commented the teamster, thoughtfully. “Well, Jordan, I’ve never stood for murder yet, an’ I won’t now!” The speaker shook his belt and loosened the gun in the holster.

“Thanks, Sim: but I’d rather you kept out of it.”

"You've still got a little time, an' a better hoss," cried Tim anxiously. "Git astraddle an' head for home."

"Not now, Tim: I've a little pride, you know; and, besides, I've as much right in Yucca as they have."

"Wall," said Sim, with great disgust, "mebby they won't bother a crazy man; an' if you ain't crazy, then nobody ever was. They've seen yore hoss an' they're separatin'."

"Run for it, Jordan!" begged Tim. "No. It's too late now. All right: one murder in this place was one too many. You watch th' front door, Sim; I'll take th' back. If they go for their guns, blow 'em inside out!" He was on his feet as he finished, and in four quick steps was behind the bar, one hand under the counter and out of sight. He had to learn, however, that there's a deal of difference between an amateur and a professional.

A voice was heard just outside the building.

"Naw, Red! It's Jordan's hoss. Leave our animals at th' tie rail, an' come on."

"Keno!" replied the second voice. It was followed by the sound of milling hoofs, and after a moment the back door was darkened as a man stepped into the room, squinting for better sight in the dim interior. One hand hooked to a gun belt, he stepped aside, his back to the wall, as his companion entered through the other door.

"You pack a gun, Jordan?"

"No."

"Huh! I reckon yo're lyin'."

"I do not pack a gun," said Jordan. "You're welcome to think what you choose."

"Still playin' tenderfoot, huh?"

"That's my privilege."

"Yeah? Well, that won't save you from payin' us a little visit," said the puncher with a sneer. He looked at Tim and then at the teamster. "Sim, you hitch up an' freight that stuff out to th' ranch. We got somethin' else to do."

"I ain't freightin' nothin' nowhere," replied Sim, positively. "It's right where I agreed to put it, an' it's yore business now. You git it outa that wagon so I can head for home."

"We've got company ridin' home with us," said the first puncher. "An' that means we ain't got time to foller th' pace set by no damn' pack hosses. We're in a hurry. Hitch up that team."

"I can well believe that," said Jordan, conversationally.

"Believe what?" asked Red, scowling.

"That you're in a hurry."

"Yeah?"

"You just said so. One of my boys might ride in. Is that the reason for your haste?"

"Yeah? How'd you like to shut yore big mouth?"

"Drop your gun belts and I'll give you that job," said Jordan. "You and your friend there, one at a time. It doesn't take much guts—to use a favorite colloquialism—to threaten an unarmed man from behind a gun; but it does take guts to

stand up and get a good thrashing. Have you any thoughts on that subject, or don't you think at all?"

"Just now my boss is doin' my thinkin' for me, far's yo're concerned," retorted Red, his face emphasizing his cognomen. "Yo're goin' home with us, an' yo're goin' pronto. After you get there, you can mebbly have some rough-an'-tumble. More'n you want, I reckon."

"I suppose so," said Jordan.

"Git up on yore feet!" snapped Red's companion, shuffling forward. "Get on yore feet an' stick yore hands behind yore back. Pronto!"

"Better raise yourn!" said Tim, throatily, jerking his hand from under the bar; but he moved too slowly. Also, his expression had given his thoughts away. He found himself looking into Red's gun, and when the teamster decided to take a hand he, too, found himself covered.

"Cuttin' in an' takin' sides, huh?" demanded Red, glaring at the helpless bartender. "Let loose of that gun!"

"I'm not takin' sides; but nobody's goin' to be kidnaped outa this here room without me standin' ag'in it!" replied Tim, angrily.

"All right: you stand ag'in it; an' likewise ag'in that wall!" retorted Red. "I ain't got nothin' ag'in you, an' I don't want to shoot you. Step right around an' lean ag'in that wall."

"I've got a gun on you, Jordan," said the second puncher, "an' I figger to bend its barrel around yore head right soon if you don't do what I tell you. Put yore hands behind you an' turn 'round." The last speaker was untying, with his left hand, the kerchief which lay around his neck; and, the

kerchief dangling from his fingers, he stepped forward as his companion growled a warning for Jordan to stand still. For just an instant his gaze left the teamster.

“Stick yore guns back in th’ holsters,” said Sim Trevor, glints of anger in his eyes, “an’ I’ll take my chances on an even break with th’ pair of you. You’ll find it takes guts to do that, too, you coyotes!”

“What you aimin’ to do with Jordan?” growled Tim, streaks of white on his ruddy face.

“Gimme them wrists!” snapped Red’s friend, jamming his gun against the ranchman’s stomach. “Turn ’round!”

“Whatever turning is done will be done by you,” said Jordan grimly.

The man in front of him brought his knee up swiftly and the rancher slumped to the floor, sick, paralyzed, numb with pain.

“Gawd-you!” shouted the teamster, outraged by the foul blow. His hand moved swiftly as he leaped to his feet; but he was an old man, older than he realized. The crash of a gun stopped him, and he raised his hands. A little bead of blood dropped from the lobe of his ear. It had been very close.

Red peered through the powder smoke, his face working with anger.

“Teach you to mind yore own business!” he snarled. “Th’ next one will git yore belly!”

His companion stood erect. Jordan lay in a twisted heap, his hands tied behind his back. His breath came in hoarse, whistling gasps, and he writhed in agony.

“Put him on his hoss,” said the puncher, “an’ start him for th’ ranch. I’ll load th’ pack hosses an’ come cuttin’ along right behind you. There’s only th’ two of us, an’ there ain’t no tellin’ how soon some of them Three J coyotes will be ridin’ in. Get a-goin’.”

“Keno,” said Red, starting forward. He leaned over, grabbed the collar of the helpless ranchman and dragged him to the door, through it, and out into the dust of the street. To get Jordan into the saddle he had to sheath his gun and use both hands, which put him into the class of the unarmed, and thereby saved his life. The gun had hardly dropped into the holster before a two-legged wildcat, also sheathing guns, leaped from the corner of the building and landed with both spurred heels on Red’s face and neck. Red, bent over and off balance, went down in a heap, struggled to sit up, and went down again to stay, from the impact of a swinging right fist that landed squarely on the point of his jaw.

With hardly a pause, the wildcat, too enraged to think of guns, whirled and leaped in through the open door in the face of a burst of powder smoke, ducking and twisting. For an instant the impact of lead threw him off balance, but he recovered himself, twisted his upper body swiftly as he sprang again, and thus had the whole driving weight of his strength and poundage behind the right-hand smash which drove a panicky gunman across the top of a table, through the rickety back of a chair, and piled him in a still heap at the base of the wall.

Mesquite stood on spread feet, slightly crouched, each hand holding a gun, peering through the thinning powder smoke. Blood streamed from a furrow just below an ear, where the Tumbling L bullet had ripped a ragged seam through skin and flesh.

"It's all right, Mesquite!" shouted Tim, almost dazed by the unexpectedness and swiftness of what had happened in the last fifteen seconds. "There's only *two* of 'em!"

"Gimme a hand with Jordan!" snapped the foreman of the Three J, whirling toward the door. He picked up the Tumbling L gun, hurled it through the door and across the street without slowing his stride. "What did they do to Jordan?" he asked. "What were they *goin'* to do with him?"

Tim, pressing closely on his heels, answered fully, and when he described the action of that vicious knee his voice trembled.

CHAPTER XVI

RED was beginning to stir, and Mesquite reached down swiftly, jerked the gun from its holster and threw it after the other Tumbling L weapon. Then he untied the kerchief from Jordan's wrists and helped the ranchman to a sitting position.

"You feelin' better, Jordan?" he asked, stepping back.

"Yes. I can get my breath—all right—now," answered Jordan, trying to smile. The result was rather ghastly. "That knee got me- Great God, man!"

That was a close one!" he exclaimed, staring at the bleeding wound on his foreman's face. "I guess you're the—man who needs attention—rather than me!" His sympathy and anxiety for the ills of another took his mind off of his own, to his own advantage.

"Skin deep," grunted Mesquite, slipping an arm under his employer's shoulder. "What do you say we try to stand up, John?" he asked.

“Good idea, Mesquite. If that dog had kneed me in the stomach I’d be all right by this time; but the damned beast- Ah, *that’s* good. I’m all right, anyhow. Who said I can’t stand up? Tim, you play doctor, and give me a drink of the sovereign remedy. A *big* drink, Tim. I’ll follow you right in, and-

Hello!” he exclaimed, seeing Red clearly for the first time. “Good Lord! He’s even bloodier than you, Mesquite ! I don’t know what it was he ran into, but it was the proper thing, judging from the results. He certainly had it coming to him, and more too.”

“Yeah; he did,” growled Tim, drawing back a foot.

“Don’t! Don’t kick him!” snapped Mesquite. “He’s had enough, for now; if he needs any more, I’ll give it to him. Get up. *Get up!*” He reached down, grabbed Red’s shoulder with one hand and his collar with the other, and heaved him to his feet. “Get inside!”

Red wobbled and weaved a little, due to unreliable knees, but he made it, and dropped into a chair, still dazed and bewildered. His friend was sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall, holding his jaw with both hands and mumbling profanity. Sim Trevor sat on the edge of the righted table, swinging one foot gently, a gun lying loosely in his hand. Sim’s ear was a smear of crimson.

Tim brought forth a new bottle, the other having left the table when the second Tumbling L puncher had swept its surface clean on his sliding dive toward the wall.

Mesquite faced Red ominously.

“Tim says you figgered on takin’ Jordan out to th’ Tumblin’ L,” he said. “That right?”

Red glowered but made no reply. His neck and cheek seemed to be on fire, and his jaw felt as tender as a boil.

"That right?" persisted the Three J foreman, leaning a little forward.

There was no reply.

"I'm goin' to ask you just once more," said Mesquite, quietly. "Is that right?"

"Yeah, reckon so," mumbled Red, and groaned.

"Why?"

"Don't know."

"Why?" persisted Mesquite, his eyes frosting.

"Big John said, a couple of times, that he'd like to get hold of Jordan," came the grudging answer, so mumbled as to be barely intelligible.

"Yeah? Why?"

"Don't know."

"Don't you?" asked Mesquite sarcastically.

"No."

"I see," said Mesquite. "Not havin' nerve enough to make a fight at th' fence, he mebbly figgered to swap Jordan for th' fence. That right?"

"Yeah, reckon so," mumbled Red, uneasily shifting his eyes.

Mesquite studied him for a moment and shook his head.

“Yo’re lyin’, Red. I don’t know why, but you are. A man usually lies to keep hisself from tellin’ somethin’ that’s even worse. What could be worse than that? I don’t just know, but I’m aimin’ to find out. Look me in th’ eye. You hear me? *Look me in th’ eye!*” He drew back his arm and slipped the right foot a little behind the other. “Why did Big John want Jordan prisoner out on th’ Tumblin’ L? Think fast an’ talk lively!”

“He was goin’ to swap him, like you just said,” muttered Red, sullenly, his gaze resting on that ominous right hand.

“Go on, Red. You got as far as that, before. Go on!”

“Well, Sairy Jordan would-a married Big John, only for you fellers.”

Mesquite’s left arm pushed Jordan back.

“Huh! Goin’ to swap him, huh? You still reckon Big John was goin’ to swap Jordan for th’ fence?”

“Yeah, that’s it,” answered Red, his gaze again getting restless.

“Yo’re a liar, Red,” said Mesquite, grimly. “What he fieceered on doin’ was to swap Jordan for Sarah. That right?”

“Reckon so,” admitted Red, flinching from that threatening right hand.

“You fellers are a right fine breed of skunks,” said Mesquite after a moment. “I’ve tried not to kill any of you, up to now. Reckon I’ve been makin’ a mistake. You can tell yore friends that I’m beginnin’ to get over that. Jed’s thumb well yet?”

“Don’t reckon so,” answered Red in a low voice.

"Tell him that I'm sorry," said Mesquite, slowly. "Sorry that I shot at th' gun hand." He was silent for a moment, thoughtfully studying the cowed puncher. He glanced at the puncher against the wall and then looked at Red again. "You an' yore friend get outa here, an' get out right pronto. Hear me?"

"No, by Godfrey!" interrupted the teamster hastily.

"They don't leave town till they git their freight outa my wagon! Don't you reckon I ever want to git started for home?"

Mesquite looked at the indignant old man and smiled.

"They give you that ear?" he asked.

Sim's reply is unprintable.

"All right, Sim; all right! I don't want to step on yore toes. Me an' Jordan will pull stakes an' let you get yore wagon unloaded. If they don't step lively enough I reckon you can handle 'em. Their guns are across th' street, somewhere."

"Reckon I *will* handle 'em, if they don't!" retorted the old man. "I got a gun of my own, if I need one; but I won't need no gun while I got my whip. I'll flick out hunks of their ornery hide, by Godfrey!" He scowled at the two punchers in turn. "Git up, an' git out, both of you! If that wagon ain't unloaded in somethin' under three minutes, I'll begin where Mesquite left off. G'wan, now: *git!*" He watched the two men move slowly and sullenly toward the door, and started to follow them; but he stopped and turned. "You feelin' all right, Jordan?"

"Yes, Sim. I can ride like a centaur," lied the ranchman, forcing a smile.

“Never seen none of that tribe,” grunted Sim, and faced the young foreman. “You better let Tim wash out that gash, an’ clap a chew of tobacco onto it, or pour a little liquor into it,” he suggested.

“It’ll do till I get back to th’ ranch,” replied Mesquite. “You better watch yore unloadin’ crew. Well, so-long, Sim. So-long, Tim. Come on, John, if you reckon you can sit a saddle.” He led the way out of the room, watched the ranchman climb slowly and laboriously into the saddle, and then walked swiftly toward the rear of the general store to get to his own horse.

They rode at an easy pace along the homeward trail, silent for the first mile or more, each busy with his own thoughts. Mesquite’s wound had coagulated until it bled but little; but Jordan was still in great pain, and would be for several days. Every step of the horse hurt him, but he set his teeth and tried not to show it.

Mesquite faced his companion and studied him for a moment.

“Any time you want to stop, John, you say so. We ain’t in no hurry.”

Jordan shook his head stubbornly and shifted a little in the saddle, seeking a more comfortable position, and seeking in vain.

“The sooner I’m home, the sooner I’ll be in that chair,” he said. “How’s your head?”

“All right,” grunted Mesquite.

Another mile went behind them, and this time it was Jordan who broke the silence.

"I suppose you feel like giving me hell for riding in to town," he said.

"Why?"

Jordan looked a little surprised.

"Why?" he repeated, like an echo. "Why, because all this trouble would not have happened if I'd had the sense of a congenital idiot."

"Yo're a growed man, th' Owner of th' ranch, an' my boss," said Mesquite. "A man's got a right to ride in to any town he feels like. You give me a little more time, an' you can ride any damn' place you want, without runnin' into trouble. However, things bein' like they are, if you should-a come to me an' asked me what I thought about you goin' to town, I would-a told you that it wasn't a wise thing to do, right now. Then you could-a suited yoreself. If you felt like tak-in' th' chance, it would-a been yore own business, mostly."

"Mostly," repeated Jordan, thoughtfully. "Yes; but not entirely."

"No," replied Mesquite. "Not entirely, right now." He noticed the increased pallor on his companion's face, and stopped his horse. "Let's rest up a little," he said, gravely. "Th' joggin' kinda makes th' blood pound in my head."

A wan smile came to the ranchman's face.

"Much obliged, Mesquite," he said. "I was too proud to ask for it. Do you know, you rather grow on a fellow."

"Yeah?"

“Yes, you do,” said Jordan, easing himself by standing up in the stirrups. His legs had some strength in them now, and the knees did not buckle. And then he discovered that he had less strength than he thought.

“I suppose Dave told you that I had ridden in to town?”

“Yes; he kinda suggested it,” replied Mesquite, smiling.

“That put it right up to me, fair an’ square. I had to make my choice, an’ make it quick. If I went in after you, I had to leave th’ ranch guarded by only one man. Big John layin’ back so quiet has bothered me a lot. He’s up to somethin’. He’s got me right suspicious, an’ thinkin’ all kind of fool things. There’s no tellin’ how he’ll jump, or when. There was Miss Sarah, now—oh, well, I just had to choose. It was an even chance that I’d choose wrong; also that I’d choose right. I put Dave in th’ ranch house, asked Miss Sarah to stay in there with him, an’ hit th’ trail. I reckon everythin’s all right, out on th’ ranch. But I was bothered, John, quite a lot.”

Jordan pressed his knees and sent the horse on at a better gait than before. He was swearing under his breath. His ride to town had been full of complications he had not dreamed of; but he should have thought of them. A man had a certain right to risk his own life, but-

“And I never gave a thought to that!” he growled. “I should have! Let’s make a little better time, Mesquite.”

“No need to,” replied Mesquite. “If Big John was plannin’ a raid on th’ ranch he wouldn’t have let two of his men ride in to Yucca. I know him. He’d want all th’ men he could get—his whole outfit. Anyhow, I reckon that Dave hombre is quite a cactus, quite a cactus. You put a man like Dave behind adobe walls —well, Dave’ll hold it till we get back.” But

nevertheless he let Thunder out a little and held his position even with Jordan's stirrup. He glanced at the pain-marked face. "You set th' pace, John, an' slow down when you want to."

Jordan nodded grimly but increased the pace, punishing himself with a sort of savage elation, actuated by something of the same grim spirit as a flagellant. He had it coming to him, and he would take it. If he'd had the brains of a horned toad they wouldn't be in this fix.

The ranch house came into sight, its shutters and doors closed, and showing no signs of life. It seemed ominous to the ranchman, but brought a grim smile to his companion's face. Dave would have put up a stubborn fight, and there were no signs of anything out of the ordinary. The two riders swept down the gentle slope of the last intervening rise and saw a figure move into sight on the edge of the rear porch. It was Dave, and the sun's rays glistened and ran up and down on the slanted rifle barrel.

Jordan almost fell out of the saddle, walked stiffly to the chair, and dropped into it with a great sigh of relief. He reached out for the bottle on the little table and poured himself a generous drink, which he downed almost at a gulp. Such direct action on his part with good liquor told its story. He needed that drink.

"Excuse me for drinking first," he said, the words coming from between set teeth. "You, Mesquite? Dave?"

Mesquite shook his head and swung down, handing the reins to the grave cook and pointing with a thumb toward the corral. Dave's glance flicked from the wound on his foreman's face to the hunched-up figure in the chair; but he turned, sprang into the saddle, and was off without a word.

There came the sound of opening shutters, and then quick, firm steps crossed the kitchen, and Sarah stood in the door.

“Any trouble?” she asked, and then caught sight of the ugly wound on the foreman’s head. He had not turned away quite quickly enough. Anyhow, it would have done no good, because his shirt was a mess. She stepped swiftly toward him, and at that moment something happened to her that had never happened before. Culture was not the proper measure of a man; at least, not in this savage country. Courage, a clean mind, a hard, fit body: these were the yardsticks for proper measurement. “Mesquite! You’re hurt! Turn around!”

His grinning countenance was not nearly as humorous as he thought it was; the dried blood streaks and the dust-caked wound made the wrinkles of humor as horrible as the paint-daubed face of an Indian.

She caught her breath sharply and gripped his arm with all the strength of her small hand.

“You—you were not—shot?” she whispered, fear and horror in her eyes and voice. Jordan stirred and looked quickly at her and at Mesquite. The foreman clenched his fingers and stood like a man frozen. She was very close to him, and the scent of her hair was in his nostrils. Before he could move or speak Jordan answered for him.

“Yes, Sis. He was shot,” he said bitterly, pouring himself another drink. “Thanks to the moron who happens to be your brother. I just must have my game of seven-up, you know, Sarah. Like Nero; even at the risk of the life of a friend and a future of misery to yourself. And if you believe that it makes me feel any better because Mesquite is too polite, too

considerate, and too big-hearted to whale hell out of me for it, then you most certainly are mistaken.”

She had faced him squarely at the third word, knowing by the sound of his voice that he was in pain. She ran forward, turned his face around to hers, and studied it tensely.

“John! Not you—too?”

“No. Not me,” he groaned. “Bullets cost money, and they only use them on real persons. They don’t shoot idiots out here, but just knock them down and drag them out, as they did me. Better fix up that gunshot wound. I’m all right; all I need is time and more brains.”

“But I don’t understand. What happened, John? What happened, Mesquite?” She looked from her brother to the foreman, shook her head contritely, and did not wait for an answer to her question. “You can tell me later. Sit down, Mesquite. I’ll be right back.” She swiftly disappeared.

“How much you goin’ to tell her?” asked Mesquite in a low voice.

“Enough to cure her of any wish to go horseback riding,” answered Jordan. “She’s been getting restless. Only yesterday she wanted to go for a ride. She can go, too, any time you feel like going with her.” “Yeah, reckon so,” replied Mesquite without much assurance. He glanced out over the range, idly looking for tumbleweeds, and saw many; but not one of them was in motion. He’d better be riding on again; but only a skunk would do that now. “If I can’t go with her, one of th’ boys can.”

“I hardly believe one of the boys will do, under the circumstances,” said Jordan with a twisted smile. He searched the foreman’s face. “You ever been married?”

Mesquite almost jumped.

“Hell, no! An’ I never will be!”

Jordan’s smile grew.

“For a young man of rare intelligence, you are downright dumb—in some things.”

“That’s no news,” grunted the foreman. “What made you ask a fool question like that?”

“Curiosity, Mesquite; just rank curiosity. Downright dumb,” repeated the ranchman. “At first I was greatly worried, not being exactly blind; but the better I know you, the more I see of you, the better I feel. I—Ah, no, no! I feel all right.” He was looking at the door, and smiled as his sister stepped through it.

“Now, Mesquite, if you’ll take off your hat, seeing that there’s a woman present,” she said, smiling, as she placed the basin of hot water on the table. “It looks very ugly, but we’ll know more about that in a moment.”

Mesquite dropped the damned hat to the floor, flushed, and then grinned.

“It’s only a scratch, an’ not worth botherin’ with. Shucks, I’ve had worse ones than that,” he said.

“That’s very good; but we’ll bother with it, quite a lot,” Sarah retorted. “We will if you’ll sit still!”

Her deft fingers became busy, and the job was soon done. She gave her work a gentle, final pat, and reached for the basin; but found her patient in her way.

"I'll take care of this," he said, grinning. "To make up for th' hat. That's yore chair, I reckon." He picked up the basin and disappeared into the kitchen. After a few moments he was out again, and sat down on the edge of the porch, where he gravely listened to a little verbal skirmish between brother and sister. Finally reassured about Jordan's physical fitness, Sarah leaned back and looked at them both.

"All right," she said, encouragingly. "Now you may tell me all about it, without abridgment."

"Oh, come, Sis! That'd take us all day!" expostulated Jordan.

"All right; anything is better than nothing. Go right ahead."

"There's not much to tell," said Jordan, shifting

gently. "Two Tumbling L punchers came into Tim's while I was there, announced that they were going to kidnap me and take me out to their ranch, overcame my natural objections by knocking me down, tied my hands behind my back, dragged me out into the street, and had me halfway into the saddle when Mesquite sailed out around the corner of the building and went into action without jibing. He broke up their party, and them, too, at the same time. By the way, Mesquite, why didn't you use your guns?"

"Wanted to get th' feel of their hide on my bare knuckles, I reckon. Anyhow, Red had holstered his gun."

"But his friend hadn't. I still knew enough to see that he shot at you as you went in through the door. Then I heard the furniture crash, and must have—ah —passed out for the moment." He chuckled. "Well, I saw you leap for him in the face of his gun; and *that* is a sight that I shall always remember and cherish."

There was some further talk about the action itself, and then Sarah asked her next inexorable question.

“Why did they want to kidnap you, John? You read of such things in stories, but they sound rather absurd to me.”

“Yes, you do; and perhaps that is where they got the idea,” said Jordan. “But I shall explain that, and, I hope, cure you of any wish to go horseback riding around the range, alone and unprotected. They—ah • —they flattered me greatly. They were going to take me out to the Tumbling L, and then Big John would work upon your sisterly and womanly sympathy, and trade me for you. In other words, if you would become Mrs. Big John, he would turn me loose. Mesquite spoiled all that, and saved me from having to spoil it at the expense of my skin. Have a drink, Mesquite?” “Reckon I don’t need it, John.”

“All right then; you know best,” said Jordan, and turned to face his sister. “I just told Mesquite that there was no reason why you should not enjoy the benefits of horseback riding, providing that he or one of the boys went with you. Having seen him in action, I’d feel a lot better about it if it were he.”

She was silent, her expression troubled, her eyes on those of her brother.

“I don’t know what to say, John—what to do,” she said in a very low voice. “I wouldn’t want to take a man away from this ranch until all this trouble is settled. My riding can wait, although I’ll always be ready to go—any time . . . Her words died out and she looked at the silent and very thoughtful foreman. “But will the trouble ever be settled?”

“Yes, Miss Sarah,” answered Mesquite decisively. “It will be. We’ll kind of loose-herd it for a while, an’ if that don’t work, then I’ll do some cuttin’ out an’ brandin’.” His face

hardened, and the frosty glint came back into his eyes. "I'll end it, when th' time comes, if I have to do th' cuttin' out with powder smoke, an' th' brandin' with lead; an' I don't aim to wait too long, neither."

There was some discussion along this line, and then Jordan, struck by a sudden thought, shifted the conversation, and incidentally and without knowing it changed the history of the two ranches and of the country roundabout.

"One thing is certain," he said, thoughtfully. "My kidnaping was a sort of an on-the-spur-of-the-moment affair. It had not been definitely planned for to-day. They did not, of course, know that I was going to ride in to Yucca; and they did not come in there to get me. It was purely a coincidence."

"I've been wonderin' about that," confessed Mesquite. "I figgered it was sorta accidental, them comin' in right then."

"No, that was not accidental," replied the ranchman. "They came in to get some freight that old Sim Trevor had hauled for them. Sim was so scared that he fairly shook. He was to deliver it to them at Yucca, and they were to pack it from there out to the ranch. Old Sim is rather a craggy person, but his hand shook so that he almost slopped the liquor over the rim of his glass. At first Tim and I thought he was sick."

Mesquite was regarding the speaker with polite curiosity.

"If Sim was so scared of 'em, then why did he haul their freight?" he asked, his mind vividly picturing the old teamster's whip lash around George's throat. The old man had reason enough to be apprehensive.

"Scared of *them*?" asked Jordan. He laughed grimly, and winced a bit. "He wasn't frightened at *them*— but he was almost panic-stricken after riding more than thirty miles over

that rough trail with two boxes of dynamite jolting around behind him."

Mesquite found himself on his feet, leaning tensely toward the ranchman.

"Dynamite?" he almost whispered. "*Dynamite!*"

"Yes; dynamite," replied Jordan, curiously. "What makes-Good heavens, man! You don't mean-"

"Don't know what I mean, John," growled the foreman, his face like granite. "Why didn't you tell me before? Why didn't you tell me in town, before we left? We might have . . ." He let his voice die out, as his thoughts ran on: if he had captured the dynamite, Big John would only have obtained more.

"I never thought a thing about it," answered Jordan, slowly. "We *both* had plenty to think about, in town and out of it."

Mesquite nodded. They both had had plenty to think about, and the ranchman was hardly in condition to do much thinking about things in which he believed he had no real interest. There had been no real reason for Jordan to mention it. Mesquite stooped and picked up his hat.

"I believe you *do* mean it!" exclaimed the ranchman. "They're going to use it to blow up the fence!"

"Oh!" said Sarah, and looked quickly at the foreman.

"Would an old-timer like Big John send off for a buffalo-gun to shoot a cactus-wren?" demanded Mesquite, somewhat sharply. "Dynamite th' fence! Huh! See you later, John. Excuse me, Miss Sarah. I've got

to think about this. If they use th' dynamite on th' fence, I'll be glad to give 'em my thanks."

He shook his head gently, glanced at Jordan, and then, letting his gaze rest for a moment on Sarah, whirled and strode swiftly toward the corral. They watched him lower the bars, catch Thunder and lead him out. They saw him saddle up, mount, and ride past the bunkhouse and over a rise.

Jordan found his sister's inquiring gaze on him and squirmed a little, trying to hide the pain which so persistently clung to him. He felt that he had to say something.

"Mesquite told me that a fence war was easy to start but hard to stop," he remarked as casually as he could. "I believe him. Dynamite! But they're not savages!"

"Are you thinking about the ranch buildings?" asked Sarah calmly. "About this ranch house, and us?"

"Why—eh, no—that is, hardly," faltered Jordan. "Of course, Sis, there's just *no* danger at *all* of such a thing as *that*!"

"No?" she asked, smiling a little. "You said something, you know, about them not being savages, and I could not see how that thought could concern the blowing up of a mere fence." She was silent for a moment. He did not reply. "Well," she continued, "they may be savages; but if they are, we have no cause to fear. A person has to get right close up to use dynamite, doesn't he?"

"Why, yes; yes, he must. He's got to get close enough to put it against or on or under whatever it is that he wants to blow up. Why?"

"That's what I thought," complacently replied his sister. She nodded her head. "Then I cannot see why we have the least

cause to worry. Somehow I just cannot imagine anyone carrying dynamite getting close enough to these buildings to do any harm. I'm quite certain that I would not care to be the one to try it. Now, John: are you certain that you are not seriously injured? Had I better send someone to Wagon Springs for the doctor?"

Jordan chuckled with pride and affection.

"No doctor; just friend Time," he said. "You have wondered whether or not you would ever fit into this country, Sis. If I'm any judge of things like that, I'd most emphatically say that you have fitted in, and most beautifully so. You're a better Westerner than I am, Sarah. Your standards change easier to fit this environment. You have a better appreciation of the realities. You're beginning to see that veneer is only a covering, after all. I agree with you about the safety of the ranch buildings. With Mesquite on this place, or that Dave fellow, or Baker, or Johnson—well, I wouldn't care at all to be carrying dynamite around with me on the Three J ranch." He shot a quick look at her. "That Mesquite is quite a lad, isn't he?"

"I wonder where he is going?" she asked, studying the tip of her shoe. Then she looked up. "Aren't you getting hungry, John?"

CHAPTER XVII

SARAH JORDAN'S question could have been answered easily: Mesquite was going nowhere in particular. He swung south, instead of east toward Yucca, or north toward the fence. He was doing some thinking, and doing it on horseback. Somehow a man could think better in the saddle. The swing, the rhythm, the sound of the hoofs, the gentle push of the wind tended to clarify things.

Dynamite? Why dynamite? For the fence? It seemed to be absurd, beyond all reason. A man had to get right up close to place dynamite, and if he had swept the way clean of opposition, clean enough to place and make use of explosive, then he would have no need to use it. The posts had not had time to set enough.

Dynamite. For the ranch buildings? Perhaps, but very doubtful. Then what was left? What was at the bottom of all the trouble? Water and grass. The grass was all over, what there was of it. It was scattered, and not all lumped up in one place, where dynamite could be used against it. Water? Water was not all over. It was in just one place: the bed of the creek. But how could a man blow up a creek? He might destroy the bed, but he couldn't stop the water from flowing downhill. How could the creek be injured? The picture came into his mind: a slowly flowing stream, meandering along in its shallow bed across the range, ready to pile up against an obstruction, overflow it, and find another way; but always moving downhill. He reversed the picture, and followed it upstream instead of down. In his mind he came to the canyon, and then into it. There the water poured down the west wall in a series of frantic, fussy cascades, all turmoil and confusion.

Dynamite. Cascades. Confusion. In the hills it would not be as lazy as it was out on the range. Its bed would not be so flat, wide, or shallow. There would be places-Thunder leaped ahead more from surprise than from pain as the spurs rolled along his sides; and then found himself checked and spoken to reassuringly. Here he was all set to have a pleasant long lope, and now his rider turned him sharply and was sending him back the way he had come. There was no accounting for what a human being might do.

Davis Longstreet Beauregard Tompkins put the last plate on the table and looked up as his foreman entered the house. Dave's curiosity had been well controlled up at the ranch house, but now he felt that he could ask a question. He looked at the bandage on Mesquite's head, and remembered what the naked wound had looked like.

"Somebody pet you with a .45?" he asked, a grim smile on his face.

"Yes," answered Mesquite, his thumbs hooked carelessly to his gun belts. His face was hard, his expression forbidding; but Dave knew that it was not meant for him, and anyhow, suppose it was? He was a cook, and cooks are privileged characters.

"Jed's hand git well?" he persisted.

"No," grunted the foreman, glancing at the quiet figure in the chair against the end wall. The figure thereupon stirred, let the chair drop forward to all fours, and voiced an observation.

"Little mite close, it was," said Jim Baker. He said it gravely, after due thought; he said it, in other words, professionally.

"Yes, it was," admitted Mesquite.

"You don't want to give none of that gang th' edge," said Jim. "Go for th' gun when they make th' first move."

"Yeah," said Dave, reaching for a toothpick he did not need. "Then that's one less to pester us at th' fence—or mebby two?" he asked, hopefully.

"Neither," said Mesquite, and suddenly grinned. "I didn't pull a gun a-tall," he said. He unhooked his thumbs and gently rubbed the knuckles of his right hand with the palm of the left.

"Huh!" grunted Dave. Anyone could see that he was disappointed.

"Too close, mebby," said Jim, cocking an eye to aid speculation. He meant too close to use a gun.

"No," said the foreman with a chuckle. "I needed about three jumps to get th' proper weight behind th' punch. I got it."

"One's enough," said Dave, speaking of matters of which he was a fair judge.

Mesquite nodded, and waved a hand in a short gesture.

"Sit down, Dave. Stay where you are, Jim," he ordered. "Want to have a little war talk." He himself took a step backward and leaned against the door casing, and again both of his hands were hooked to the gun belts. His face was serious and wore a slight frown. For a moment he regarded them silently, and found them eagerly attentive.

"I want to find out just why Big John went an' sent off for two boxes of dynamite," he said, conversationally.

"Two boxes of *dynamite!*" shouted Dave, sitting erect on the chair. Dave had never used the stuff, and that was why he accented that one word.

"Two *boxes* of dynamite!" growled Jim, also sitting erect. The word he chose to accent suggested that he was familiar with the explosive in question. "Great Gawd! What's he goin' to *do* with it?"

"Don't know, Jim," answered the foreman. "That's what I've got to find out; but I have got hold of one laig of an idear."

"An' so have I!" exclaimed Dave. "He's goin' to blow up th' fence!"

"Shore, th' damn' fool," said Jim, leaning over to pick up his hat. "Reckon I better ride out an' tell th' boys at th' fence? They won't be expectin' dynamite." He laughed grimly. "Big John will shore find out that it's one thing to *have* dynamite, an' shore another thing to put it where it'll do him any good. What you say: I better go out?"

"Wait awhile, an' set down," said the foreman. He was automatically rolling a cigarette. "Jim, if you wanted to get rid of a couple dozen fence posts an' a few strands of wire, would you send off for somethin' like a hundred pounds of dynamite?"

"Not me!" emphatically answered Jim; "but / ain't Big John. You can figger an animal purty close, but there ain't no tellin' a-tall what a fool human bein' will do."

Dave's brow was corrugated by wrinkles denoting acute mental activity, and now he judiciously puckered his mouth, preparatory to giving forth a nugget of wisdom.

“They ain’t figgerin’ to use it ag’in no fence,” he said, slowly. “Likewise, they ain’t goin’ to play with it, or set around admirin’ it. They’re goin’ to use it. Some of us oughta sleep days an’ set up nights, right here on th’ ranch. You let me ketch sight of any stranger totin’ any packages toward these here build-in’s—I’ll shoot his belt buckle out through his backbone !”

“Great land of cows!” muttered Jim, uneasily turning this new thought over in his mind.

“Of course,” said the foreman, “we’ve got to keep an eye on that end of it. They *might* figger to use it ag’in th’ buildin’s. As Jim says, a human critter may do anythin’. However, I’m figgerin’ it’s goin’ to be used some place else. Question is: where?”

“Second question: when?” asked Jim, restlessly.

“Yes,” said Mesquite. “Where an’ when. I’ve got to make a try at findin’ out th’ answer to one of them questions, anyhow. Let’s shuffle th’ cards an’ start fresh. What started all this trouble with th’ Tumblin’ L?”

“Water,” said Dave.

“An’ grass,” amended Jim.

“Yeah: water an’ grass,” said Mesquite. “That started th’ fence. Startin’ th’ fence made them fellers kill old Fred. It made them eat dirt, havin’ to hoof it home from th’ canyon. Before that, though, Big John figgered on marryin’ into th’ water an’ th’ grass an’ th’ cattle. He wouldn’t do anythin’ to hurt this ranch then. All right: back to th’ beginnin’—water an’ grass. How can you hurt grass with dynamite?”

"Can't," said Dave, positively. "Hell, th' grass is all over th' range, miles an' miles of it."

"More or less," corrected Jim. "But we know it ain't grass."

"Right: it ain't grass; an' it ain't fence," said Mesquite. "Dave said th' grass was all over. Yeah: but th' water ain't. Th' water is in just one place. Th' bed of th' crick. How could Big John pay us up for everythin' that's happened? How could he hurt us most?"

"By fencin' along this side of th' crick, th' hull length of it," said Jim.

"But he knows he can't do that," objected the foreman. "In th' first place, he'd have to fence for more'n twenty miles; in th' second, it would cost him th' life of every man he's got, an' his own, too. Eight men can't watch twenty miles of fence close enough, or protect half of it."

"Yeah; an' after th' buryin' was all over, we'd tear it down," said Jim, grinning. "Go on: keep a-ridin'." "I'm goin' to, on a real hoss," said Mesquite. "That crick, this side of th' canyon, can't be hurt permanent with dynamite. It would just fill up th' holes an' go right along." He turned to Dave. "You put me up some grub. Enough to last me two, three days. I'm goin' to scout around them hills west of th' canyon, where th' crick runs. I'm goin' to follow it right down to th' canyon. You stay here, Dave, in th' bunkhouse. Jim will camp up at th' ranch house. We'll keep th' rest of th' boys out at th' fence. I'll send one of 'em back here to get supplies. They'll have to make camp out there for a few days."

"You figgerin' to stay around here for th' rest of th' day?" asked Jim, again reaching for his hat, and again getting up from the chair.

"Yes," answered the foreman. "You got somethin' you want to do?"

"Thought I'd load up a pack hoss with them supplies an' take it out to 'em, along with th' latest news. They'll be rubbin' matches on their front sights, an' seein' all kinda things in th' dark."

"All right," said Mesquite, nodding. He looked quickly from man to man. "If Jordan wants to know anythin' about that dynamite, we'll tell him we figger Big John's goin' to use it for blastin' out th' bed of Antelope Creek, up on his north range, to make him a bigger pond. There ain't no use of Jordan worryin' any more than he has to."

"Or Miss Sarah," said Dave, his placid gaze on the foreman's face.

"Yeah; or Miss Sarah," echoed Mesquite, slowly. He turned and looked thoughtfully out of the window. A tumbleweed, caught in an eddy of wind at the corner of the corral, was going around in circles, slower and slower. While he watched it, it stopped. He frowned and swung about. "Either of you boys know anythin' about that crick up in th' hills?"

"Yeah," answered Dave. "I do."

"You'll have time after supper to tell me all about it," said the foreman, turning toward the door. "Any of th' boys know more about them hills than you do, Dave?"

"No. I've been all over 'em, man an' boy."

"See you later, then," replied Mesquite.

"Anythin' special you want for grub?" asked Dave. "No. Simplest an' easiest. Use yore head."

They watched him pass through the door, mount and swing Thunder toward the ranch house.

Jim turned to the cook.

“Rustle th’ supplies for th’ boys, Dave,” he said. “I’ll be back, all ready to pack ’em, in about two shakes.” He, too, started for the door. “Dynamite!” he muttered, and was gone.

“Yeah! Dynamite!” growled Dave, heading for the kitchen. His glance rested on his own hat, lying on his bunk, and he nodded at it. “Somebody shore is goin’ to get hurt,” he told it, and passed on.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE rational manner in which to trace the course of a stream is to start at the nearer end and to pass from the known to the unknown: in this instance, from the little cascade in the canyon, and travel upstream. Here, of course, is the certain path, with plenty of firewood, more game, and water ever at hand. The first sorties into the West followed the rivers. All over the world the advance of civilization, with few exceptions, has followed the streams. The way is marked, and so is the return, without hopeless wandering. This, then, is the proper formula, everything else being equal: when there are no other considerations but those of nature. In the present case, however, there were other influences: human factors impinged, and turned the problem around. The creek should be traced from the unknown to the known, from its upper waters to the canyon; and the unknown was not as vague as it would have been without Dave’s knowledge.

A man unfamiliar with mountain and forest will often find it difficult, if not impossible, to tell another like himself how to find a given place at a distance, even if he has just come

from there; but a plainsman or a mountain man can tell another, with amazingly few words and some pertinent gestures, how to find such a place—a little speck of a valley, ridge, or stream—hundreds of miles away. William Sublette could have told Jim Bridger how to find a beaver dam half a continent distant. Jedediah Smith could have told Bill Williams how to get to a cache buried hundreds of miles in the wilderness.

Dave was a plainsman, and Mesquite was another. Dave had ridden over those mountains (mountains to a prairie man; hills to a mountaineer); he had crossed the stream where it was only a trickle, far from its clamorous drop into the canyon, and at points so high up that the extent of his vision, as he came to occasional places where he could look down over the range, seemed boundless.

One statement which Dave made stamped him as a plainsman, a prairie man: he had said that there was plenty of timber on the slopes, but that there was not enough down timber to hinder the progress of a horseman, to make him waste time in the cutting of a trail. A professional Western teamster would find no trouble, so far as trees only were concerned, in taking a wagon through. To a man of the open range, there was timber on the slopes; to a man from the Cascades, the Sierras, the Maine woods, there was none.

Dave had been explicit as to the upper reaches of the stream and how to get there; but he knew nothing of the intermediate reaches; and it was these latter which Mesquite believed would prove to be of interest to him.

Mesquite reviewed the terse but ample directions as he pushed on at a lope through the darkness. It was his intention to cover the flat range in the shelter of the night, in case some Tumbling L watcher should be lying up on the

heights; to have done with the plain and to gain the sheltering cover of the hills before dawn. Once in the hills he would ride as far as the physical nature of the ground would permit; and that, to a rider like himself and to a horse like the range-bred animal he had chosen for the work, would be far. It might be possible to make the whole journey, save for occasional side sorties, in the saddle. He had the horseman's inveterate dislike to be afoot far from his mount, and his footgear was not made for hard walking. The horse was tough, wiry, and grass-fed, able to rustle its own food and to keep its strength where a grain-fed animal would suffer.

He reached the base of the real hills at a point twenty miles west of the ranch houses, found the deep valley mentioned by the cook, and pushed into it. He made good time, considering how he spared the horse and how often he breathed it; such humane considerations would repay him many times in the end.

Dave was right about the timber: it was scattered, and of fair growth. The brush gave him more bother, but he found his way through it without much trouble. If Jordan had been riding at his side the ranchman would have lost any suspicions he might have entertained about chaps being an affectation. The twigs and hooks and spines slid off the smooth leather like water off glass. Fabric would have been ripped and torn to pieces in the first few miles.

Noon found him halfway up, and halfway to his first destination. He began to be bothered by old landslides. Great raw gashes marked the steeper slopes, the piles of earth and rocks at their bottoms like the dots to exclamation points. Sometimes the footing was treacherously slippery; at other times, treacherously weak. The strata of these rocks pitched downward and outward, suggesting that the hills

had been upheaved by pressure in the middle or by pincer-like pressure from both sides.

Evening found him on the bank of a rill that he easily could step across. He saw what was left of the little pile of firewood Dave had mentioned, and knew from this and from other things that he had reached the cook's old campsite. All that he had to do now was to follow the stream downward, carelessly at first, but cautiously along the lower levels. The Tumbling L's interest was centred on the stream nearer to the canyon and would hardly be concerned with its upper reaches.

Morning found him ready to trace the stream, and he had not covered many miles before he realized that he never had seen one just like it. It seemed at times to be a series of small lakes or large ponds; and the reason for this was to be found in the apparently prevalent slant of the strata. Landslide after landslide, some large but most small, had slid down and choked the bed of the stream; and the stream, backing up against the obstructions and filling the pockets made by them, had flowed over the dams and resumed its way. At one place in a blind canyon cutting far back from the side of the main valley, the entire point of a precipice had slipped down and formed a great hump of detritus that entirely blocked the chasm.

He pushed on again, and soon came to a place where an entire ridge had slipped down and left a natural opening, like the sill of some great window, from which he could look out and see the whole southern plain. The ranch houses of the Three J were like dice, and one short reach of the creek looked like a crooked string of silver carelessly thrown on the earth. This was the first time he had been able to see the plain. One of the reasons for this was that a range of hills on the south ended here at its most easterly point. He crossed

the little creek and stood on its other bank. Twenty feet from its noisy waters was a sharply slanting precipice of treacherous rock, dropping down several hundred feet to the top of the great pile of detritus at its base. From where he stood, the ground to the right of this detritus appeared to be higher than that on the left; according to the general slope of the land which formed the watershed in which the Three J was located, this was proper. On the Three J range the drainage was to the east.

He studied the precipice idly, with the curiosity naturally aroused by any freak of nature. Had the slide started twenty feet back from where it did, the creek never would have reached the canyon: it would have poured through the break and found the plain below at this point. As this thought passed through his mind he looked to see if there were traces of water on the face of the precipice, thinking that heavy rains might have caused the creek to overflow its banks to utilize this ledge as a spillway. He found what he looked for: and at the bottom of the detritus was a swampy area, even at this time of the year; but the latter might have been caused by infiltration of the stream through porous strata or the cracks in the rock. Jordan would do well, if the creek had the habit of drying in summer, to cut through here and utilize the chain of ponds which would be formed in the hollows of the range below.

Several deep, wide cracks in the face of the ledge took his attention and aroused his idle interest. He already knew the slope of the rifts, but these vertical fissures were food for thought. He traced out one of them which ran parallel with the bed of the creek. It extended almost the whole length of the ledge and, from the pitch of its two walls and its width across the top, seemed to have a considerable depth, which could only be proved by cleaning out the earth and rotten leaves that filled it.

Next he looked at the fissures which ran at right angles to the main one, and found that there were several. Here was a natural dam, or what was left of one, which would of its own weight some day slide down the face of the cliff and rob the canyon of the waters of the creek. Intrigued by this thought, he again stepped to the edge and looked down. The course of the storm-water overflows could be followed for a great distance over the plain, until absorption and evaporation had wiped them out. The trend of this overflow water had been east and a little south; and he could trace out the path it would take if it were constantly fed by the waters of the creek above. It would flow into the present creek bed a short distance beyond the mouth of the canyon, and make several sizable ponds on its way.

He recrossed the creek, glancing up at the towering hill beyond. The backbone of the whole range interposed itself between the creek and any northern outlet. Mounting, he rode slowly ahead, letting the horse pick the way. It was slow work. Mile followed mile and it was mid-forenoon when he began to exercise caution. He could not be very far away from the canyon, and it was barely possible that Big John might have a watcher hidden away somewhere along this part of the range. The man, if one was on duty, would not be near the stream but on the edge of the hill, where he could look down upon the plain; but he might be moving to or from his vantage point.

Mesquite swung from the saddle, dropped the reins over the horse's head, took the Sharps from the saddle scabbard, and went ahead on foot, leaving the bay to graze. Gradually the ridge to the north of him grew lower, and it was not long before the northern horizon opened up on a much lower plane. Over the crest he could see a hill or two in the distance, and this meant that the wall beyond the left bank of the creek was growing much lower. And then, turning a

bend in the creek bed, he came upon something which made him stop.

He had not known exactly what he was searching for on this scouting expedition, but he had known that it must be something which would call for the use of dynamite, and something which would work harm to the Three J, or at least enrich the Tumbling L. For miles he had juggled these vague specifications in his mind, trying to fit them to everything he saw; and now he paused to fit them again.

A valley opened toward the northwest, and appeared to join the greater valley on the far side of this range of hills. He was looking down into the northern watershed, the watershed north of the one in which the Three J was located. And he was looking into the blue of distance. Somewhere in that general direction was the headquarters of the Tumbling L; but right in front of him, and almost at his feet, was a flat ledge, long and low, an interposing bulwark between the waters of the creek and the northern watershed.

The ledge was similar to the one he had seen farther up the creek. The first had opened out to the south; this one, to the north. He could not see all the details of this ledge from where he stood, but about half of it. Big John had overlooked a great opportunity. He could enrich his southern range with unfailing water, ruin the Three J, and in time buy it in for a song and use it for extra grazing land. All he had to do-

Mesquite swore suddenly: this was the thing for which he had been hunting. This was the place where the dynamite would be used. With the thought, he began to act like a hunting dog.

Those same Mountain Utes who had taught his father the art of reading sign could not have given a much better example

of the art of moving silently and keeping under cover than the Three J foreman gave in the next quarter-hour. A comparatively fresh cigarette butt had given him the cue for silence and caution. Manufactured cigarettes are held together by glue; the roll-your-owns are not; and this butt of a roll-your-own had not yet opened up along the lapped seam.

His first thought had been of the possibility of a Tumbling L lookout, posted on the brow of the hill to keep watch over the Three J men guarding the fence across the canyon mouth. With this in mind he worked his way parallel with the stream, but keeping well south of it, to find the trail of any such person. He chose the lowest ground whenever possible, and worked his way from boulder to boulder, bush to bush. At last he reached the rim of the canyon itself, peered down into it, saw his men riding about the range south of the fence, and started to return.

On this eastward sortie he had discovered no tracks, no signs of anyone on this part of the hill. Since he had to return if he was to follow down the creek bed itself without crossing a high ridge between him and the stream, he might as well make assurance doubly sure; and for this reason he chose a still more southerly course for the return journey. Its testimony was negative and endorsed that offered by the eastward sortie. It also allowed him to hug the slope of the hill and protected him from being seen by anyone on the higher hill north of the creek. Back again at the starting point of his little scouting expedition, he stepped into the creek and began to move slowly down it. A shoulder of rock pushed out to the water's edge fifty or more paces below, and he could not scout the north side of the creek until after he had passed that. This was the immediate task, and he felt certain that somewhere on this hill a man was playing sentry.

He moved cautiously along the face of the shouldering pile and then stepped out on the bank. Halfway between there and the ledge he removed his boots, placed his big hat on them, and went on again, bent over and moving like a shadow. This was a game he thoroughly enjoyed, a game he was master of. If Big John had discovered the possibilities of this ledge there simply must be a man on guard; and since the Tumbling L owner had made no trouble at the fence, and had sent off for two boxes of dynamite, Mesquite was reasonably certain that Big John had discovered the possibilities.

He shifted his belts until the buckles were at his side instead of in front of his stomach, moved the holsters out of the way, and lay down on the ground. There was now no metal to scrape over the rock and to carry a warning to listening ears. A little at a time he inched forward, gently removing twigs from his path as he came to them. He was careful not to brush against any bushes and set their tops trembling. Wriggling around on one side of a boulder, he checked himself abruptly and began to study the surface of the ledge at close quarters.

A crossmark, roughly scratched on the stone, caught his eye; then he saw the second, third, and fourth. He went on a few feet farther and then moved a little to the right in order to peer around the pile of loose rocks which blocked his vision. There was the fifth crossmark, the sixth, seventh, and eighth. Estimating the distance from the last mark to the rough rock wall at the other end of the ledge, he believed that there might be two more of the marks. There was no doubt, now, about Big John having discovered the possibilities of this natural dam.

Mesquite lay there quietly, studying the situation. Through lack of knowledge of what this hill held, he had suspected

the placing of a watcher on the south side to overlook the range below; it was almost certain, now, that there was a watcher, and if so he would not be far away from this ledge. By rights he should be above it, where he could look down upon it. All right, then: he would wait awhile and let the other man, if there was one, do all the moving.

One thing caught his attention almost at once: the slope of the strata in the exposed rock wall rising above the other end of the ledge. It ran almost horizontally, instead of sloping as it did back at the first ledge he had discovered. This meant that it was a great deal stronger, more resistant, tougher. What natural faults it had, what planes of cleavage, were not slanted so as to let it slide of its own weight. Tremendous force would be needed to break it down and release the waters of the creek into the new channel. Those great slabs would have to be blown bodily from their place and out over the cliff.

Two boxes of dynamite: one hundred pounds of explosive. Of course, those scratched crossmarks located the positions of the drill holes. Ten holes, and ten pounds to the hole. He wondered if that were enough, not being familiar with dynamite, except in theory. Back at the upper ledge, with its outward and downward slanting strata and planes of cleavage and the deep faults in the rock, he believed that ten pounds of dynamite would blow the whole thing loose, and gravity do the rest.

Big John was no fool. He had done well to hold his hand from open reprisal against the Three J. That would have meant bloodshed, endless and bitter fighting; here he had the very heart of the Three J in his hand and would not have to fire a cartridge; and from the shipment of dynamite and those significant marks on the rock, it looked as if he were going to close his hand with vicious, deadly power. He must be

laughing in his sleeve to see the Three J men guarding a fence which would amount to nothing in a short time; and he must be fiercely exultant over the way he would repay them for past indignities.

Mesquite could slip back to his horse, ride to the ranch, get the boys, and return to fight for the possession of this ledge. They might win out, but if they did, it meant that a strong guard must always remain, day and night. That was something not to be seriously considered. Jordan's pay roll was too large as things were. They had to find some way to backfire.

He thought of his boots and hat, and pushed backward again to gain the shelter of the boulder. There certainly must be some way to beat the lay of the cards—and there was! What a fool he had been not to think of it instantly, for it had been squarely before his mind for the last few minutes: certainly the thought of the dynamite and those crossmarks and the slope of the strata of the exposed rock wall should have told him the solution; but he had been thinking of Big John's play rather than his own.

He smiled grimly, worked past the boulder, and began to crawl toward his boots. Big John could use all the dynamite he cared to; he was welcome to blow away the whole hillside as well as the ledge. And then he would have his feet kicked out from under him while he laughed over his triumph. Nature had taken a hand in this game, and nature was on the side of the Three J.

He reached out and drew the hat to him. The boots came next, one at a time. Brushing sand, bark, and twigs from the soles of his socks, he pulled on the boots, shoved the hat well down on his head, and crawled back to the boulder again. He had patience: not as much as the Utes, perhaps,

but enough. If there was anyone watching that ledge he wanted to know it. Perhaps it would be Jed Peters, and perhaps his hand was well again; but Jed was foreman, and he would put somebody else on a job like that.

He was inching softly past a small ledge of rock when a sound stopped him and made him freeze. A pebble rolled and bounded down the hillside above him and well to the left, from the east face, overlooking the face of the ledge and the cliff. Twigs snapped, there came a scraping noise, and then the sound of a hatful of pebbles bounding down the slope. All this noise was reassuring in two ways: it located the maker of it, and it proclaimed beyond question that he thought himself to be alone on the hill. The man made as much noise as a cow. Heavy, irregular steps told that he was moving down the hill. And then a new note sounded.

A faint voice, barely audible, came up from the valley below; and the unseen watcher on the hill bellowed an answer and made faster time. He thrashed and jumped steadily downward, passed Mesquite's plane, and leaped to the ledge. The faint aroma of a cigarette drifted past the foreman's nose and awakened a strong desire to smoke. He grinned and inched ahead again, his big hat in his left hand, the heavy rifle in the right.

George, of the Tumbling L, was standing on the ledge on spread legs, peering down over the rim. The mark of Sim Trevor's whiplash was still plain to be seen. George would carry that mark for a long time: perhaps forever. From below came confused sounds, and among them and most prominent was the ring of steel on rock. There was considerable swearing, and some laughter. As the minutes passed the words became plainer.

"Come down from up there, you grinnin' jackass, an' give us a hand with these tools!" said a peeved voice, and again metal rang on rock.

"Here's a couple of sledges for you, George!" called another voice.

"I'll give you a hand with th' tools, all right," said George, without moving; "but I'll be damned if I'll have anythin' to do with them boxes. I don't see 'em. Where are they? You forget to bring 'em?"

"Th' boxes are back on th' ranch. Come on down here!"

"Why didn't you bring everythin' in one trip?" asked George.

"We did. Come on down an' give us a hand!"

"All right; but where's th' dynamite?" persisted George, stubbornly.

"In sacks, you damn' fool! Reckon we want to tote fifty-pound boxes up this damn' wall? We split it up an' sacked it. You comin' down?"

"If you don't, you'll shore wish you did!" roared another voice.

"All right! All right!" said George, and eased himself over the rim and out of sight from above.

Mesquite moved swiftly. This was a good opportunity to get back to his horse; but he wanted to see more of these operations. He slipped back as far as the shoulder of rock which crowded the creek, and then worked along it at right angles to the latter, heading up the same hill that George had just come down, but in another place and from a

different direction. He took plenty of time and exercised care and caution, and at last reached the place he had in mind.

From his new vantage point he could see the steeply sloping wall of the precipice and the slowly, laboriously climbing men. They were strung out various distances apart, and they each had about as much as they could carry. Far below, at the foot of the declivity, were the horses, with double their number of pack animals. They did not look to be very large from where Mesquite lay.

George met the first man, took his drill rod, and turned to go back to the ledge. That person, relieved of his load, in turn relieved the man below him; and in a short time a number of brown sacks began to pass up the wall. Mesquite was about ready to slip away and get to his horse, when the nature of the loads changed and held his attention for a few more minutes—a few minutes too long, as it turned out. Cooking utensils and camp stuff began to appear. He nodded his approval: with a wall like that to climb, the sensible thing was to make camp up above, where the water was.

Big John had not appeared; but six men of the outfit were in sight. He looked for Jed Peters, and Jed's bandaged hand; but Jed was missing. While he watched, George wriggled over the rim of the ledge and remained above. The second man joined him, picked up some camp duffle, and walked back toward the stream and out of sight. Losing sight of a man was cause for uneasiness, and Mesquite became more alert. George warily passed the innocent-looking sacks, picked up a pack of food supplies, and followed his companion. A third Tumbling L puncher reached the ledge, picked up another load of supplies, and followed the others. Here were three men lost to sight.

Mesquite slipped backwards and started to retreat toward his horse while the way was open. The way he had come was the direct way, and if it were closed he could work around on the far side of the hill and get to it in that way. He had not covered many feet before voices below him, and a little back of him at his right, told him that he was too late. George and his friends were making camp near the big rock shoulder; and the Three J horse was not two hundred yards west of them, around the second bend!

CHAPTER XIX

THREE men in the brush, behind him: between him and his horse, and the horse not hidden. Three men climbing up steadily toward the ledge, in front of him. The last three were at his mercy so long as they were in the open; but a man just couldn't open fire on three helpless men without the slightest provocation; and if he did, he would arouse the three who were out of sight and in good cover. His best plan was to wait, hoping that the horse would not be discovered.

All six punchers had cause to be vengeful: it would be a long time before any one of them would forget or forgive that long, punishing, and humiliating walk from the canyon to the Tumbling L ranch house. Two of the three men still climbing up the face of the cliff were the punchers he had manhandled in Yucca, the would-be kidnapers. The man nearest the ledge was Red, and one side of his face and neck was plastered with dusty bandages. When he moved his head, it was stiffly, and with an effort. Just below him was his companion in the Yucca misunderstanding, and his jaw was beautifully swollen. It was all he could do to spit, let alone chew. Certainly they had no reason to love the Three J foreman.

Red's arm went up over the rim of the ledge, clamped tightly down against the rough stone, and he drew himself onto it and rested without attempting to stand up. He looked around for sight of the first three, heard their voices, and glanced at the pile of duffle. Then he faced around again, and looked down over the rim of the ledge.

"Keep a-comin', Frank," he said, encouragingly, and grinned at the mumbled reply.

Frank reached up, threw an arm over the rim, and wriggled to safety, lying at his companion's side. His remarks concerning that particular cliff were not complimentary. Neither were they very plain, since he much preferred not to move his jaw.

"Where are th' others?" he mumbled.

"Makin' camp, I reckon," answered Red, and again laboriously and stiffly peered over the rim. "Come on, Tommy," he encouraged. "Th' view's fine from up here."

Tommy called the view names, hugged the wall, and rested for a moment. Sweat rolled through the powdery dust on his tanned face, and he dragged one sleeve after the other across his forehead. He looked down at the horses and was thankful that he always had had a good head for heights. The animals looked to be about half-size. Then he cocked his head and looked up, at Red's bandaged face.

"Yo're too fat," said Red, trying not to grin.

"Wait till I get my second wind an' I'll show you," replied Tommy. He looked at the hill rising far above him on his right, and into the cold, blue eyes of Mesquite Jenkins, although he did not know it. Mesquite was well hidden so long as he did not move. Tommy had no reason to suspect

that hostile eyes were peering out through that tangle of brush. George had been on guard out here, and had been up there only a few minutes before. Tommy dragged both sleeves across his face again and went to climbing. A few moments later he, too, wriggled over the rim and lay prone.

Three of them were still out in the open and helpless; but the other three were the aces in the holes. They had not yet discovered the Three J horse. None of them had any reason to explore the creek, so far as Mesquite knew; perhaps the bay would not be seen.

"Would you hombres mind soilin' yore lily-white hands an' tote some of them supplies?" asked a voice back in the brush.

"We'll do just that, Sweetheart, when we get damn' good an' ready," said Red. He lazily got to his knees and then stood up. "Come on, Frank: that was th' *cook* talkin'. You never want to get a cook sore at you. You come along when you get yore breath back, Fatty," he said to the third man.

"Fatty my eye!" said Tommy, rolling over and sitting up. He watched his two companions pick up their loads and disappear. Then he lay down again.

Five in the brush, and one in the open. The horse had not yet been discovered. There was still a chance.

Tommy arose, loafed over to the dwindling pile, carefully selected the lightest remaining package, and followed his friends.

Six in the brush, and none in the open; but the way was clear, if Mesquite could gain the ledge unseen. He heard voices wrangling about various small duties which would take no man far from the camp; and then the damned cook

had to open his mouth. He wanted firewood: *dry* firewood, according to his flatly announced specifications. That would send them afield. That meant that they, or some of them, would spread out, looking for small, down stuff. Why hadn't he left the horse farther back? He dared not move for a while.

Unless it was necessary to fight this outfit, the odds were too heavy under the circumstances. Six to one would be bad enough, but possible, in the open; in the brush it would be suicide. No man with any common sense at all would voluntarily start an argument. All the six, or some of them, had to do, was to freeze behind cover and wait for the lone man to move or be smoked out. And if six men couldn't force one man to move, they deserved medals for'dumbness.

"Did you strip them hosses?" asked a voice that sounded as if it belonged to George.

"Ask Tommy: he's playin' wrangler. *Hey, Tommy!*"

"Now what you want?" replied a distant voice. It came from above and behind Mesquite. Here was a threat.

Mesquite swore under his breath. Hadn't the damned fool had all the climbing he wanted for a little while, at least? He carefully moved his right hand until it rested on walnut, and waited.

"You won't find no wood up there!" yelled the cook.

"You shuck th' gear off'n them hosses, Tommy?" bawled Red.

"Naw!" replied Tommy. "I figgered we was goin' down for th' rest of th' stuff, instead of passin' it up like we did. Then I plumb forgot."

"It'll do you good, Tommy, to climb that cliff ag'in. It'll take some of th' lard off'n you," said another voice, this one from the opposite direction.

They were pretty well around him, but would soon return to camp, thought Mesquite; but he kept his hand on the gun.

"I've covered half a homestead an' can't find no wood," shouted Tommy, this time sounding farther away.

"You reckon it's got wings!" yelled the cook, disgustedly. "There's a hull pile of down stuff, unless yo're too lazy to tote it that far."

"Where?" asked Red. He was close to the camp again.

"There! Up th' crick! You blind?" replied the cook.

Mesquite slipped backward a few feet, turned like a turntable, and began to make fair time along the circling course he had considered. If he could get to the horse first, he'd chance that Red would be out in plain sight. That was a good enough break for any man.

"Come on, Tommy!" yelled Red. "You reckon I'm aimin' to hawg this here wood-totin'? Well, I ain't." He stopped and glanced behind him. "An' where's Frank? Hidin' out on us? Hey, Frank!" There was no answer. "Hey, Frank! Come on!"

Mesquite froze and had sense enough not to stare at the man who came into his sight fifteen feet below him. When Stetson put wide brims on his hats he unwittingly did Mesquite Jenkins a great favor. Frank moved along, sending little showers of pebbles down the declivity, passed on the upward side of the great boulder, which showed him to be neither fool nor tenderfoot, and gained the ledge. Again his name was called, and he moved a little more briskly. Then

he was out of sight, and he had no thought that a certain Three J foreman was cursing him from the soles of his boots to the dents in the crown of his hat. Mesquite had lost precious moments during Frank's one-man parade. Then he heard Frank swear and thrash around in the brush, and hoped that he had stepped on a rattlesnake; and then the Tumbling L puncher was in sight again, retracing his tracks. Again his name was called, and this time he replied to it with an angry shout.

"Aw, will you go to hell! I've lost my eatin' tobacco!"

"You shore picked a damn' good time to lose it!" jeered the cook.

"What you mean?" shouted Frank.

"You know what I mean!"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"First thing *you* know I'll lose my temper! comin' down to cases, I ain't no squaw!"

"You wait a shake an' you can lose yore temper right in front of me!" said the cook, stepping out briskly.

"Come back here! Come here, you loco fool!" cried a third voice, and then there sounded a fourth and fifth, almost like one.

"Get cover, fellers!" yelled Red and Tommy. Red's voice continued. "There's a Three J - up here som'ers!"

"Here's his hoss!" shouted Tommy. "Git cover!"

The cook stopped in his tracks and ran back again to get his rifle. Frank took a running jump into the brush. To the east, near the far end of the ledge, there sounded one loud rustle, and then there was silence.

Mesquite did not move. It was too late to get to his horse, and that was the last place he wanted to go now. He knew they would use it for bait. His best chance was to wait near the ledge in hope of an opportunity to slip down the cliff and get away on a Tumbling L animal. Tommy had admitted that the horses below were still saddled, and that much time would be saved if he could get to them. Night might give him his chance.

The one man he had chief interest in was in the brush back of the far end of the ledge. This person was more likely to command the rim of the cliff far better than any of his friends. So long as Mesquite lay still and forced the others to do the moving about, the situation was not as bad as it might be.

There was a slight movement behind a large rock in an opening of the brush. The man near the ledge was getting restless. No; he was just getting foolish: his hat slowly appeared over the top of the rock. It drew no fire, and after a moment dropped back out of sight. Mesquite felt a little insulted, and he sneered: what a fool they must believe him to be, to try to get him to expose his location by biting on a moss-covered trick like that. Even if the wearer of the hat showed his head for a fair shot, he would do so in safety. Mesquite would do no shooting until he had to. He wished night were not so far off.

The minutes trickled by slowly. Here and there, after a while, there were sounds of movement: the crack of a dried twig, the rustle of a leaf, the click of a rolling pebble. Even the low

murmur of voices came to the ears of the Three J foreman. Mesquite emulated the noble red man, and did not move. Every minute that passed harmlessly by worked in his favor, because he had patience; because it brought darkness that much nearer. After dark he'd show them how to play tag. At the far end of the ledge there came intermittent but connected sounds: the audible record of backward progress, to use an expression which in this case is not contradictory. Mesquite identified this watcher as Number Six, and paid him the compliment of being deeply interested in his movements. Number Six was sitting in the driver's seat, but perhaps he did not know it.

As Number Six put ground behind him, he increased his speed and noise. Then he spoke in a whisper, but he put plenty of whistle on his letter S's: the sound carried. He was now near the place where they had located their camp. That end of the ledge was free, but where was Frank? After a moment Frank himself answered that. The unmistakable tones of his voice arose near the camp.

"Whose hoss was it?" he asked of somebody. "That Mesquite feller's?"

"Naw. It was branded Three J," came the answer in lower tones. "Shut up, you damn' fool, an' try th' hill acrost th' crick."

"Try it yoreself!" retorted Frank. "You don't ketch me climbin' up no hills." After a moment he added, thoughtfully, "That hombre ain't movin' an inch. Well, all right: neither am I!"

"First you lose yore tobacco!" said a sarcastic voice. "Now I reckon yo're losin' yore guts."

"Too bad he didn't knock yore jaw plumb outa th' country!" retorted Frank. "You use it too blame' much."

“Yeah?”

“Yeah!”

“Shut up, Frank. Shut up, Jim,” said the cook. “Spread out an’ get between him an’ that hoss.” “Shut up yoreself: yo’re makin’ more noise than we are!” retorted Jim. “You don’t figger he’s aimin’ to crawl up on three of us at once, do you?”

“Betcha half a month’s pay it’s that Mesquite-,” said Frank.

“Shut up!” snapped the cook. “I’m pullin’ outa here. You fools talk too much!”

“Shore. Try th’ hill acrost th’ crick!” jeered Frank, repeating the cook’s words. “Let’s see if *you’ve* lost anythin’.”

“Yeah!” laughed Jim. “It’s yore own idear, cook.”

“Go to hell!”

Silence again. The minutes dragged with increasing slowness. A chipmunk jerked around a rock, ran out into a little opening on the hill, and sat up, its nose quivering inquiringly. It was a little jewel of fur, a thing of life, of joy, of beauty. It was ten feet below Mesquite and he did not know that it was there; but it served him, nevertheless. A pair of keen eyes, peering out under the brush, watched the little animal with an interest which was not that of the naturalist.

The chipmunk dropped to all fours again and began to move about, naturally, unafraid. After nearly half an hour the man lying prone under the brush inched backward, slowly retreating. There was no human being on that side of the hill, according to the silent and unbiased testimony of the little animal. The watcher should have waited just four

minutes longer. Had he done so, he would have seen the chipmunk sit suddenly erect, sniff eagerly, and disappear like a streak. An eddying current of wind had swung down to him from the south.

Red was worried. He suspected very much that things were not as they appeared. Here was a Three J rider up on the hills, spying on them. This rider had left his horse near the ledge where they had already marked out the places for the holes. He had left his horse and had not tried to get back to it again. Why? If he had been spying on them, then he must have seen them ride up to the cliff, or at least seen or heard them when they were climbing up the great wall. They had made noise enough, God knew, shouting back and forth, like a lot of children on a picnic. If the Three J puncher had wanted to get away he could have done so easily; or he could have stood on the rim of the ledge and killed them all like flies on a wall. But he did not try to get away. What was the reason? Why, he hadn't wanted to get away. He wanted to stay around, against the six of them. Why? To make trouble. What kind of trouble? The answer to that was not plain, but egoism and the instinct of self-preservation offered Red an answer that would do in lieu of any other. The damned assassin was waiting for dark, when they all would be asleep. What he could do to them then was only limited by his silence and dexterity. This was something to be thought out, to be talked over. It was not very convincing, but it was an answer. To the uncritical mind an answer is an answer, whether it explains anything or not, and Red was not critical. He pushed back through the cover, calling in a very low voice.

"What you want?" asked another very low voice from an indefinite point in the brush.

“Somethin’s wrong, Tommy. Want to talk it over,” said Red, wriggling forward with more purpose now.

They cautiously worked toward each other, both alert and taking plenty of time. Their nerves were getting a little frayed from the continued silence of the man for whom they were looking. At last they met behind a rock and exchanged worried and half-hearted grins. If someone had said “Boo!” just then they would have left their boots behind them.

“Who you reckon he is?” asked Tommy in a whisper. He glanced over his shoulder and then let his glance rove restlessly about.

“ ‘Tain’t Jordan,” said Red, flatly.

“No, of course not.”

“There’s only one man in that outfit that would play a hand like this,” said Red, emphatically.

“That Mesquite feller,” grunted Tommy. Far away a twig snapped, and he stiffened.

“Yeah; that Mesquite feller,” echoed Red.

Tommy’s swearing lost nothing by its softness: he meant every word. This crawling around in the brush, with the other man lying low, was not his idea of a pleasant afternoon.

“We got his hoss,” he said, thoughtfully. “An’ he’s a hell of a long way from home,” he suggested, a note of vicious satisfaction in his voice.

“Yeah!” replied Red, catching the thought. “By Gawd, we’ll let *him* know how it feels to hoof it! We will if he gets away,”

he added as an afterthought.

"If," growled Tommy. "There's six of us, up here. I got a feelin' we'll pay up for a few things that hombre has done to us."

"But why didn't he pull his stakes when he had th' chance?" asked Red, frowning. "If he was watchin' th' ledge he must of known we were comin' up here. Lookit th' noise we made!"

"Mebby he couldn't make it without lettin' George see him," suggested Tommy.

"George?" sneered Red. "That wasn't it."

"Well, it don't matter much why he's here; main thing is to see he never leaves. No--coyote can put me afoot more'n twenty miles from home an' not pay up for it. Go back where you was. We'll drop th' hoss, an' let *him* worry about gettin' home. Mebby he'll do some movin' around, then."

"No," growled Red, a cunning gleam in his eyes. "A dead hoss won't have no pull for him. Cover th' hoss, let it live, an' pick him oft if he tries to get to it. He'll have to do that, won't he? If he don't try it in daylight, he will after dark."

Tommy thought of that punishing walk home from the canyon and shuddered. It was as long a walk to the Three J ranch houses, with a range of hills to climb.

"He shore will!" he announced, emphatically. "All right: we'll go back where we was. Keep your eyes open an' watch that hoss every second. When he comes he'll come fast: be ready for him."

Red's expression became vicious, and he looked closely at his companion while he spoke. He hesitated to voice the

thing that was in his mind, but determined to make it known.

"You ever hear a hoss scream?" he asked, abruptly, narrowly watching his friend.

Yeah, grunted Tommy, a look of distress flitting across his face.

"Well, if that Mesquite coyote don't show up before th' light begins to get poor, I'll mebby find a way to coax him out."

"What you mean?" asked Tommy.

Red mumbled something.

"You torture that hoss an' I'll spread your nose plumb all over yore face!" said Tommy.

"Yeah?" sneered Red, nastily. "There ain't nobody in *this* outfit can do that, let alone you."

"Yeah? Well, I'll try damn' hard!"

"Yo're not only hawg-fat, but chicken-livered, as well," growled Red, pointedly. "You mind yore own business, an' I'll mind mine."

"That hoss is my business!" retorted Tommy, and backed away toward his former place of concealment. Once again in his chosen cover, he slid the rifle forward and waited. If Red started to fool with that horse's eyes, by Gawd, he'd be tempted to blow his head off.

Red retraced his own course, got snug again, and waited. He had not exactly meant all that he had said to Tommy; but, his play being so flatly called, he might have to make good.

Yes, sir: he would make good, and he wouldn't wait till darkness, neither. Let that fat, chicken-livered polecat open his mouth—all right, he'd give the fool a chance to make a play. Anger warmed him, and he eyed the horse with a growing hatred. Walked more than twenty miles, he had! Somebody was going to pay for *that*. Then another thought came to him. It might be a good play, and he could blame it on Mesquite. If he got Tommy first, it might be better. He slid backward and began cautiously to change his position; but he did not know that Tommy, being nobody's fool, was doing the same thing, and had started first.

CHAPTER XX

MESQUITE, believing that there might be another feasible way down the cliff within his possible radius of action, studied the ground immediately around him. A rain-washed gully offered him a fair chance to get up higher on the hill. Height was not necessary in itself, but upward was the only way he could go from his present position, and it was all right, providing he had cover. He twisted a little until he could see the entire length of the gully. Its nearer bank would shelter him from the south, the direction of most danger; and there were several points along it where horizontal lines of rocks or brush provided a reasonably safe way out of it. He studied each of these in turn, and found that one of them would give him shelter for a considerable distance—as far, in fact, as he could see from where he lay. The curve of the hillside hid the far end, and would hide him, too, if he could gain it. Perhaps from that point he would be able to get a good view of the cliff itself. It was not much of a risk, not so much of a risk as to be foolhardy; and a man had to take risks to get anywhere. If he could discover a quick and safe way down the face of the cliff his troubles would largely be over.

He squirmed and wriggled to the gully and dropped into it without mishap. For the next dozen paces his progress was comparatively rapid, and when he stopped wriggling he was at the transverse line of cover he had studied so closely from below.

He slid swiftly out of the gully and among the sheltering rocks, where he waited a moment, listening intently. Reassured by the silence, he followed the new course and after a few minutes of cautious progress he found himself rounding the curve of the hill, and a moment or two later was on its north side, with the whole mass of it between himself and his enemies. Fifty feet lower down was the rim of the cliff, a sheer drop of a hundred yards. Looking ahead and westward, he studied its curving face, and saw what promised to be a way down it; and once down it, he could slip along the base, make a quick dash for the horses and, with luck, run off the whole bunch and get away safely.

He was in no hurry, however, for he knew what haste might cost him. The danger lay between where he now was and the rim of the cliff at the point where he hoped to go down. He could not see all of the rim at that point, and was forced to move on again. So far as the horses were concerned there was no need at all to hasten. There was no danger that Tommy or any of his companions would hazard the climb down from the ledge to strip off riding gear. They had other things to think about and were not worrying about horses.

Again he moved forward toward the hummock of rock that barred the rim of the cliff from his sight. It was a distance of only a score of yards, but it took him as many minutes to gain it; and when he had gained it, and a clear view of the rim, he shook his head regretfully: the overhang was too

great. He would have to get down from the ledge, the way his enemies had climbed up. The safest time to do that was after dark; which was also the most dangerous. Safest, considering the six men watching for him; most dangerous, considering the climb itself. He was between the horns of a dilemma: all right. What usually lay between horns? Brains. He would endeavor to use his to such advantage, to call upon all the woodcraft he had been taught, so as to leave six men holding the bag—and he fervently hoped they would find it empty.

The little hummock of rock which now sheltered him was an ideal cover ideally placed. No one could get at him from the rear, because behind him was the sheer drop of the precipice. At his sides and in front his horizon at no place was more than a hundred yards distant, clean-cut, abrupt. A man must show his head to crawl over it, and a head in this light would show up against the sky like a chunk of lava against a sheet.

He made himself comfortable, his feet down the slope, his face turned toward the top of the hill. More than once in the last few hours the great rifle had been a nuisance; but it was not a nuisance now. He laid it down beside him and slipped a Colt near it, and put half a dozen rifle cartridges on the ground near his hand. Time would drag, but he had patience; and he had done all the moving about that he cared to do until the dying light gave him cover. He had nothing to do now but to think.

First, he considered his position in relation to certain known points. The ledge: he knew exactly where it lay from the hummock, and could go straight to it in the dark. His horse: that required more thought; but after a few minutes he had placed it. Yes, he could go straight to it, too, if the six were not at hand. To do that, under the circumstances, would be

utterly foolish. He was glad that he had left Thunder back on the ranch. The horse he had ridden was just a horse, and the Three J had numbers of them; but Thunder—well, it was Thunder. He hated to lose his saddle, but what must be must be.

The rays of the sun were now slanting at a little flatter angle. So far, none of the six had shown any real curiosity about what might be lying on this north slope of the hill. They had good reason not to show any. They, too, were waiting. He knew what they would do: they would divide, part of them watching the horse; the others, the ledge. That was all right, for in division there is weakness. Ha! The ledge, too, was a bait. It would be watched as closely as the horse. If he could draw them away from one point or the other . . . Here was a matter for thought. It was worth all the thought he could give it. And while he wrestled with this intriguing problem, he heard the horrible, soul-searing scream of a horse. Again it came, chilling the blood. The problem was swept from his mind, and he was moving up the hillside in a direct line toward that tortured animal.

He never had shot a man from cover; but let him get his sights lined up on *that* human beast! He was on all fours now, moving more rapidly, knowing that he was going straight toward a trap. Now he was entering the danger zone, and he slowed only enough to slip from rock to rock, bush to bush. The great Sharps moved over the ground in short, swift jerks, and made the only noise there was, and that was slight.

He slipped off his sombrero, left it lying on the ground behind him, and pushed forward on his stomach, heading for a tuft of bunchgrass just beyond that second rock. From there, he knew, he would be able to see the horse if they had not moved it. Again came the scream, and it rolled little

balls of ice up and down his spine. He put one foot against a rock and shoved himself ahead, his eyes on the tuft of grass. Another scream made him quiver.

He stopped behind the tuft and slid the rifle forward. Whoever the beast was, he was crouching behind the far side of the horse, but his legs were in sight. Mesquite guessed what he had done, and was doing. To kill the horse would be an act of mercy; and to kill the horse and see it drop down like a curtain, revealing the man behind it ... He slipped off the trigger safety and cuddled the stock of the rifle against his cheek. The great gun roared, and the horse went down as if struck by lightning. A bullet stung his face with grit and screamed into the sky. The man exposed by the dropping of the horse was Red, and for one brief moment he stood stupefied by surprise and fear. Then his hand streaked downward to his belt, his eyes on the thinning smoke about the grass tuft. Mesquite was closing the breech on another cartridge when a shot rang out before him and a little to his left. Red's face for one instant was contorted by rage and fear, and he dropped like a plummet, killed from behind. Mesquite fired at the smoke of the other rifle and heard a curse. The answering shot, thrown off the mark a little by the impact of Mesquite's lead, struck a rock on his left and became a screaming skyrocket.

Again the Sharps steadied and roared. Tommy arose to his full height, his head and shoulders above the brush, fired spasmodically into the air, and dropped from sight. Farther to the left another gun spoke, firing blindly into Mesquite's smoke. Then came a second shot from the same gun. The bullet tore a bit of hair from Mesquite's scalp, and Mesquite, rising to his knees, pitched sideways and a little backward, falling and rolling to safety. His ruse had been so instantly played, the range so close for a rifle, that the marksman shouted exultantly to his friends and began to

work swiftly forward, not yet abandoning all caution. The brush behind him became noisy. Tumbling L punchers were rapidly working toward the kill. The first firing had started them moving, and their friend's exultant shout had increased their pace. The damn' fool should have known that he couldn't fight six men.

Frank heard a groan and saw the top of a bush tremble. That was where Tommy had been. He pushed forward, parting the bushes on each side of him. Tommy was sitting up, slowly shaking his head. He would not be worth much to himself or anyone else for the next week or ten days. Frank bent down, examined the wounded man hurriedly, nodded his head, and then hastened on again in answer to the cook's shout. From what the cook said Red was dead, and had been shot from behind. The four punchers drew together behind the last cover between them and the top of the hill. The same thought filled all four minds: Mesquite might only be wounded. It would be well to use some common sense from here on.

Mesquite's rolling had taken him far enough down the hill to assure him of safety for the moment. He grabbed up his hat, covered a few more yards on hands and knees and then, getting to his feet, ran at top speed around the hill and toward the unguarded ledge. Speed or caution? Speed enough would render caution unnecessary; but there must be no hesitation, not even in deciding the matter. Speed it was. Let the others use caution, and the more they used the better he would like it.

He slid into the rain-washed gully and down it, dodged behind the boulder, where he had spent so many long minutes, and away from it. At that instant he became aware that the shouting behind the crest of the hill had ceased. Had they already discovered that Tommy's shot had been a

miss? It did not matter much: he had made his decision and it was too late to turn back. For a few minutes they had been on the other slope of the hill, leaving the ledge unguarded; but that time had passed, and now they would be working back toward the ledge again; and among them there would be a man or two working forward more rapidly than the others. A man or two who suspected how things were going.

Seconds were vital. Each one that passed took with it more than its even proportionate share of this opportunity to escape. He had taken this risk rather than wait for night. While these thoughts were in his mind he was moving, weighing them more as an abstraction than as a determination of a course of action.

He slid down the last few feet of the hill and dropped onto the ledge at its southern edge, close up under the brush. He had no time to crawl, no time to waste on caution: swiftness was everything. If he could slide over the rim of the cliff, without being seen, then he could count on a considerable time without molestation. If they did not see him leaving the ledge, they would fear that he was holed up close by and be fearful of running out in plain sight to peer down the face of the precipice. They knew, now, that he had hidden on the hill; and the hill covered the ledge. If, however, they knew he was climbing down they would dash across the bit of open ground and riddle him without danger to themselves.

Back of him, to the right, he heard sounds of a man working through the brush, and without much caution. Even with him, on his right, he heard sounds of another. Ticks of a watch would decide the whole thing.

He crouched a little lower without materially decreasing his speed, came opposite the point of descent and then, to save himself from disastrous discovery, threw himself flat on the rock and squirmed and clawed frantically toward the edge.

He made it without drawing a shot or a sound, half slid, half rolled over the rim, his feet swinging and searching swiftly for a hold. They found it, and his head and then his left arm slipped from sight. The rifle hampered him again, but he could not afford to leave it behind, and it had no strap. Slipping, sliding, working down cautiously for short distances; jumping, sliding, and again going cautiously; such were the alternations of his swift, downward progress.

He passed the halfway point and glanced up, expecting to see a head or two silhouetted against the blue of the sky. There were no heads in sight. The horses, grouped below, looked much bigger now. The men above him would be searching cautiously in the brush, steadily drawing closer to the rim, until some more courageous soul would risk the open ledge and look over its rim. That no one had done so already was a tacit compliment to himself.

At about the three-quarter point he looked up again, ready to flatten himself against the wall; and then put every energy into his descent. Still no head showed. He had a few more seconds, at least. The steepness of the cliff ceased suddenly as he struck the top of the detritus, but while the steepness and the danger of falling were gone, he found the footing much rougher among the heaped-up stones. Another upward glance, hasty and begrudged, showed the rim still free from enemies: they had given him more time than he had dared to hope for.

The last drop of a dozen feet he took in a leap, landing almost against the side of a saddled horse. It was a pinto, of

striking coloration. The animal reared and whirled; but it was a split-second too late. Mesquite's right hand threw the rifle into the left and darted out as a continuation of the motion and seized the reins. He left the ground with a great spring and vaulted into the saddle; and as he struck it, astride, the vicious shriek of a bullet sprang from a rock above his head. He had no time for upward glances now, and no need to look. Jerking the quirt from the saddle, he brought it down on the nearest horse as he rolled the spurs on his own mount. Shouting like an Indian, and waving his hat, he started the horses ahead of him and stampeded them down the trail which they themselves had so lately made.

Bullets whined about him: they were shooting down, instead of horizontally, and this would bother them a little, until they got the hang of it. A horse went down in a heap, another leaped convulsively and dashed past the little herd. He was still spurring and yelling, and quirting any animal within reach. Suddenly he jerked, stiffened with resolution, and set his teeth. A fiery rod burned through his shoulder. He hoped that it had not been made by a ricochet. The bandage which Sarah Jordan had put on his head began to slip, but he had neither time nor hands to bother with it.

Scattered trees began to slip past him. The growth became thicker and in a few moments more hid him from the sight of the frantically shooting men on the ledge. There was a rifle in the scabbard of the saddle, and he picked it out and threw it away to make room for his Sharps. The scabbard was small and too short for the great rifle, but he jammed the weapon in and knew that it would stay there.

He slowed the pinto and saw the little herd ahead slow up in answer. The valley began to open out on both sides. It was fair grazing range, but there were no cattle on it. Then he looked intently at a point ahead of him and to his left, and

corrected himself: there were cattle on it. This seemed to be more reasonable, for in these hills and in such a valley as this there must be at least a little water, a spring or two.

He rode forward, threw the horse herd into a mill, and, despite the pain and stiffness of his wounded shoulder, managed to get their saddles off, one by one. He left the riding gear where it fell and, mounting again, once more stampeded the animals, knowing that they would work away from the hills behind him and toward their home range. Once more he had stranded the Tumbling L outfit and left it to travel on foot.

He felt of the wounded shoulder and his hand came away wet and sticky. Stopping the horse he took his knife and slashed the shirt. The puncture was clean and round: the bullet had not been a ricochet, and if it had struck bone it had drilled through cleanly. He took stock of his feelings: his head was clear, and there was no feeling of weakness to tell him of any appreciable loss of blood. He was all right—all right for a while, anyhow. He might be able to get to Yucca, or even all the way back to the Three J, if the jolting of the horse did not keep the wound open. He wished that he were riding Thunder: this pinto had a choppy, tied-in stride that he did not like.

The cattle he had discovered were not far out of his course, and something urged him to have a closer look at them. The foundation of the cattle business is cattle, and a cattleman's curiosity regarding them is instinctive. He drifted toward them on a gentle lope and then pulled the pinto down to a walk. He should have had no trouble in getting close enough to read the brands, but he found that these animals were unduly suspicious and wild. They stared at him for a moment and then started at a lumbering run down the slope, angling to the north.

Well, cattle out in a valley like this might easily be wilder than those on the open range, where horsemen were daily sights. Just the same he'd have a look at them if it cost him all the blood in his body. The horse leaped forward under the spurs. It was a swift race but a short one. The pinto ranged alongside one yearling and crowded it closely. Its ears were swallowforked, and the edges of the cut had not yet healed. He slowed, let the animal forge ahead, and then came up on its other side. The fresh Tumbling L mark had been burned either too deeply or with too hot an iron. It suggested hurried branding. Here and there a blister had broken and showed the raw flesh under it. At one place it looked as if brand worms had gotten in. If that were so, then it would make a mean and stubborn sore. If he had more time he would drive this yearling ahead of him: take it to Yucca for evidence. Huh! There really was no evidence that this animal did not rightfully belong to the Tumbling L, but he had his doubts about the matter.

He returned to the faint trail again and pushed on at a lope. He felt all right, he told himself. It required a little more effort to sit the saddle, but he felt all right. Yes, sir: he *was* all right. Again he felt of the wound and under it. Wet, sticky, and cold. His hand pressed on down inside the shirt until it was stopped by the belt outside. He was wet and clammy and sticky down to it, and below it. This would not do. He untied the kerchief from around his neck, shook it to free it of dust, and made a pad of it. By holding this against the wound with his right hand he could check and perhaps stop the flow of blood. The entrance of the wound, around on his back, would have to go as it was.

Miles went past. The valley had flattened out so much and grown so wide that it had lost its valley characteristics. He caught himself slouching forward in the saddle, and from

time to time he shook his head to get rid of a disturbing vagueness. Johnny Nelson would be glad to see him, but he hated to leave Mrs. Ricketts like this. He carelessly let a spur roll along the pinto's flank, and in the ensuing activity he had to grab the pommel. He never had done a fool thing like that before, and it angered him, and likewise helped to clear his head. Pommels were for ropes, and not for hands. He had grabbed the pommel with his right hand, and was surprised to find that the padded kerchief had not fallen from the wound. That was good.

More miles. He must have been riding for hours, although the sun told him otherwise. He had always thought that a man could trust the sun. The horse had been following the trail it had helped to make, outward bound, that morning; but it was going home now, and required no guidance. It turned rather abruptly around a pile of rock, and as Mesquite was about to jerk it around again he stopped his hand. The pinto knew more than he did.

Ranch buildings were sprawled out on the southern slope of a rise, less than half a mile away. This must be the Tumbling L, and the trail to Yucca would start from its corral. All right: all he had to do was to cut south around the ranch and ride east until he found the trace. He put his hand on the wound again, and found the pad missing. He had also lost the bandage from his head; but the latter did not matter. Where had he lost the pad? He had to have that pad, riding a fool horse like the pinto.

He groped around inside his shirt, but the pad was not there. If his head didn't feel so damned queer, he might be able to remember better. Well, it was gone; but he had to have one. There wasn't any question about that a-tall. He needed another, if he was to cover all those miles between this place and town. Better than that, he needed proper bandaging,

that he would not have to hold in place; that would not fall off. Hell of a note, it was.

The ranch houses looked like dirty boxes. Hah! There would be a cook in the Tumbling L bunkhouse. That fellow back in the hills wasn't a regular cook, according to some of the talk he had heard. The cook would not know him. Big John and Jed Peters might be around somewhere, too. Well, needs must when the devil drives. He sat erect in the saddle, his left hand on the reins, despite the pain. Never let 'em know how bad you are hurt. Pain was a good thing, sometimes : it stung a man and kept him awake. He rode straight for the bunkhouse, glad that the building faced the other way, toward the ranch house and the trail to Yucca. He could see the Yucca trail now. That was good. Then he laughed: He was going to call at Big John's back door. All right: to hell with Big John.

CHAPTER XXI

IT WAS no unusual sight on the Tumbling L, or on any other ranch, to see a puncher riding in toward the bunkhouse, and there was not another horse on the range for miles around that could be confused, by any stretch of the imagination, with the ugly and vivid pinto which George liked so much: and this was especially so with men who knew the horse well and saw it daily. The Tumbling L cook, chancing to glance out of the window, recognized the animal with the same lack of interest he might have shown in looking at a piece of furniture, paid no particular attention to the rider, and returned to his biscuit making. He had no affection for George; indeed, when he had learned that old Sim Trevor had wrapped the lash of the bull whip around George's neck, the cook had wished the old man had used more strength. Any fool knew that a pinto was an inferior strain; all right,

then George and the horse, in the cook's estimation, were well matched.

Up in the ranch house, Big John stepped out on the back porch to get a dipper of water. That last jug of whiskey was too raw and powerful for even his throat or Jed's. He glanced toward the bunkhouse, and saw the pinto and its rider just as they were being hidden by the corner of the building. George, the lazy hound, had found some excuse to dodge the work up on the ledge. For a moment Big John glared at the place where the rider had been and then, blinking his bloodshot eyes, glanced down at the dipper in his hand, and remembered what it was that he had come out to get. He slopped water from the rear door to the living room, slammed the dipper down on the table, and looked at Jed Peters.

"That lazy whelp's back ag'in," growled the owner of the Tumbling L.

Peters stirred, raised his head from his crossed arms, and looked up, juggling his thoughts into the semblance of a pattern.

"Mus' mean George," he said, with an effort. "That right?"

"Yeah," growled Big John.

"Thought so. We'll give him a little time to git what he wants, an' see if he starts back ag'in," stated Jed. He mumbled something and focused his eyes on the thumb of his right hand. The wound had healed, never having been much of a wound, but the bandage lay near by on the table. He regarded it owlshly, and gravely saluted it. It was a great joke, that bandage.

Big John, watching his foreman, grinned savagely and nodded.

“That’s a right good trick, Jed,” he said, his eyes on the rag. “You put on a left-hand gun—I got a left-hand holster som’ers about—to catch his eye, an’ blow that Three J foreman into hell with th’ hand he Aggers ain’t no good. Where’s yore glass?”

“I dunno,” answered Jed, fumbling aimlessly. “Hell with it: gimme th’ jug.”

Mesquite passed the corrals, saw four horses in one of them, and kept on going. He pushed the pinto almost into the kitchen door, and when he swung down from the saddle he was standing on the sill.

The cook, bent over his biscuit dough, felt the heat of slowly rising anger and raised his head as he turned to give George a laying out: he had told him before that the kitchen was no entryway to the bunkroom. He did not see George: he saw a blood-streaked stranger leaning against the door frame, regarding him with cold hostility; and the stranger’s right hand held a gaping Colt on a level with his belts. The cook’s mouth opened, shut slowly, and opened again, to remain open in a gape of amazement.

“What—who-” he said, and then stopped from sheer lack of ideas.

“Get that clean towel off th’ shelf,” ordered the stranger, trying to speak crisply. “You got a job of bandagin’ to do, an’ right quick. One false motion will get you a slug. Move pronto!”

The open mouth closed slowly, but the cook’s brain was beginning to function again. He was no fool, and he had no

desire whatever to be a hero. The expression on the stranger's face and the ominous look of the gun were facts. The identity of the stranger was unknown to him, and the man was wounded and needed help. He had been in a gun fight, evidently, and had received the worst of it. He was a bloody nightmare.

The cook half turned, reached up to the shelf, and took down the towel. He ripped off two suitable pieces and then waited as the stranger cautiously slipped out of the shirt, one arm at a time; but there was not an instant when the gun failed to cover the boss of the Tumbling L kitchen.

"Rip th' shirt down th' middle an' take it plumb off'n me," came the cool command, and the cook stepped forward against the muzzle of the gun and did as he was bid. The wound looked much worse than it was.

"Stranger," said the cook, as he again picked up the pads and bandage, "you don't have to hold no gun on me."

"Might save you some trouble, later on, if I do," replied the stranger, smiling coldly, and he dropped his left hand to rest on the gun in the left-hand holster, in case the cook should be tempted to grab at it. "What you do under a gun muzzle you can't help doin'," added the wounded man.

The cook stepped to a corner shelf and picked up a bottle of horse liniment, cure for most of the injuries of the range, from an aching tooth to a broken leg. He was liberal with it, pouring it into the wound. Mesquite stiffened and set his teeth, and whatever vagueness had troubled him went out as the liniment went in.

The cook tore the rest of the towel into strips, ran them around Mesquite's back, tightly holding the liniment-soaked pads in place, and then brought up the ends and passed

them over the stranger's shoulders. Mesquite felt that his raw flesh would not be raw for long: he felt that he was being cooked, and he was partly right.

The job done, the cook stepped back, waiting; and an idea burst in his mind: the stranger was riding George's pinto! There had been a gun fight. Then what had happened to George? George had been out watching the ledge in the hills, a job he liked because he could sit down and look around. Who was this stranger, and what was he doing on the Tumbling L? He looked more closely at the wound on the man's face. Yes, perhaps it was. That, and a closer scrutiny suggested the stranger's identity: yes, by all that was holy, it *was* the Three J foreman! And he had been wasting towels and liniment on him. There could be no doubt about it, a-tall: he had heard this man described often enough. If he could find some way to detain him until Big John and Jed Peters showed up . . . Well, perhaps he could.

"You oughta have another shirt," said the cook, turning toward the bunkroom door. "I'll get you one."

"I had th' same idear," said Mesquite, stepping forward. He was surprised by how strong he felt. There was nothing like good horse liniment, poured on where the flesh was raw and tender, to take a man's mind from other things. He could almost smell the flesh cooking. Why wouldn't that be a cure for brand worms? That was an idea he would remember.

"I'll be right back," said the cook, hurriedly, glancing behind him.

"I'll help you look for one," replied Mesquite, crowding on his guide's heels.

"You better rest, stranger," warned the cook over his shoulder. "I'll bring you a bottle of liquor, too. You look like you need it."

"That's another idear I had, too," said Mesquite, following his leader through the door. "I wouldn't get too close to a winder, or door, or do no singin' or whistlin' or wavin' of arms," he said, glancing about the room. Two rifles stood in a corner, and he carelessly stepped in front of them.

"Here," said the cook, dumping the contents of a war bag on a bunk, "here's a clean shirt. Belongs to Jed, an' it'll be a mite big for you, 'though I reckon that don't make no difference."

"Not none a-tall," responded Mesquite, holding out his left arm and not showing how it pained him; anyhow, he did not know whether the pain came from the wound itself or from the liniment. He drew it back again and held it closely against his side, the clean shirt gripped tightly.

"Ain't you goin' to put it on?" asked the cook, showing his disappointment.

"Shore," answered Mesquite, smiling thinly; "but not here, cook; not here."

"All right, suit yoreself. You'll feel better after you've had a drink and climbed into that shirt," said the cook, finding a bottle and wishing that the stranger would change his mind about putting on the shirt. A man was pretty helpless while a shirt was over his head.

Mesquite took the bottle, drew the cork with his teeth, and drank. The raw liquor stung him and brought tears to his eyes; but he was not so blinded that he did not see the

cook's quick glance at a hol-stered Colt hanging from a nail at the head of a bunk.

"Now we'll go back to th' kitchen," said Mesquite, politely stepping aside to let the cook go first. He followed closely on the man's heels. "Keep right on goin', out to th' corral," he ordered as the cook paused near the hot stove, where a heavy iron frying pan was lying, bottom up.

"Corral?" asked the cook in surprise.

"Yeah: corral. There's four hosses in it that you've got to turn loose. After that I'll take care of 'em. Step right along, an' don't look back. You don't have to worry about that fryin' pan: I ain't figgerin' on steal-in' it."

"All right," replied the cook, grumbly; "but why in hell you want them hosses turned out . . . The rest was a mumble.

Mesquite smiled. He knew why he wanted them turned out, and so did the cook; and he was in no hurry to put on the shirt. He had seen the slowly dawning look of recognition in the cook's eyes. There was plenty of time to crawl into the shirt.

One by one the four horses popped out through the corral gate, and the cook slowly followed after them, carefully putting up the bars on an empty enclosure. He was glad he had not given the stranger an undershirt. He was in for trouble enough as things were. He leaned back against the corral wall, and watched the half-naked rider round up the little herd and start it toward the Yucca trail.

He pushed away from the wall and started slowly back toward the bunkhouse, being yet in rifle range of the departing Three J foreman. George's pinto horse: a gun fight. Well, knowing George, and having heard a great deal about

the Three J man, perhaps it was George who had gotten the worst of it. Well, that was all right, too. Another appraising glance at the horseman sent him into a run. He reached the bunk-house, dodged around it, and kept on going, and began to shout for Big John and Jed Peters. It would be just like Jed to make him pay for the shirt and get a new one in place of an old one.

He had almost reached the porch before he received any answer, and then Big John staggered to the door and profanely wanted to know why a man couldn't enjoy a little drink in peace on his own ranch. He found out, blinked, yelled over his shoulder, and started on an awkward run toward the bunkhouse. The profanity grew. Both his own rifle and Jed's were there. Then he learned that there were no horses to ride, and stopped to tell the cook, panting at his side, who he was, who his parents were, and where he was going when he died.

Jed wobbled through the door, crossed his legs, and fell. He crawled to the edge of the porch, fell off it, and scrambled to all fours. His uncertain eyes momentarily focused on the back of a half-naked horseman just dropping out of sight on the far side of a rise.

"Injuns!" he yelled, drawing the Colt, and emptying it in all directions.

CHAPTER XXII

A **FEW** miles from the Tumbling L ranch house Mesquite left the four horses to wander as they would, put on Jed's checkered shirt without much trouble, and went on his way toward Yucca. He felt quite good, much better than he had dared to hope for an hour or two earlier in the day. The cook had done a good job with the pads and bandages, and had

stopped the bleeding. The liniment still burned like fiery coals. His head was clear, which was the main thing. The wiry little pinto rocked on, steadily putting the miles behind it without apparent effort, and awoke a certain admiration in its rider.

The roofs of Yucca came into sight, the walls pushing up steadily further into view; and then he rocked up the slope of a small rise and saw the hamlet before him. There were no signs of activity, no horses at the tie rail, no human beings on the street. He headed for Tim's low, long adobe, and climbed out of the saddle as he stopped at the door.

Tim looked up, saw the familiar checks of the shirt, and stiffened a little; but his expression changed at the sound of the voice.

Mesquite laughed gently.

"Yeah, Tim: it's Jed's shirt, all right."

"Yeah, but how-What happened to Jed?" asked Tim curiously and, be it admitted, a little hopefully.

"Nothin', I reckon. I didn't see him," answered Mesquite. "Up to now I've refused yore liquor; but this is one of them times when a glass will come in right handy."

Tim's eyes were slowly taking in details.

"Yo're wounded ag'in!" he exclaimed, and started to come out from behind the counter.

"Yeah, a little," ruefully replied the foreman. "Seems like I'm collectin' plenty of lead these days. I'm gettin' fed up on it, Tim. I been takin' things too easy with that gang. First thing they know, I'm goin' on th' prod."

Tim hesitated, stopped, turned back again, and slid a bottle and glass across the counter.

"An' a little water," said the foreman, vividly remembering the strangle hold taken by the last drink he had had. He downed the drink, sent the water after it, wiped his lips, and turned. "See you again soon, I reckon."

"Hope so," grunted Tim. "So Jed's all right, huh? Nobody hurt?"

"Didn't see Jed," replied Mesquite. "Reckon he's holed up som'ers, nursin' his thumb. Red's dead, an' mebbby Tommy. They all got to walk home ag'in, all them that's left. Well, so-long."

The foreman strode through the door, swung up into the saddle, and loped toward the Three J trail. Tim followed slowly, digesting what he had just heard.

He stepped through the door, staring at the pinto and the rapidly shrinking shirt. Scratching his head, he moved slowly back again, and stopped before the bar.

"Huh!" he said. "I knowed somebody was due to get hurt. Red, an' mebbby Tommy. Well, there ain't no harm done, yet."

The proprietor of the general store drew back from his grimy front window, shaking his head in bewilderment. "Jed's shirt, an' George's hoss, an' he come into town from th' Tumblin' L," he muttered. "Reckon I'll go over an' see Tim. Somethin's shore happened."

Mesquite pushed the pinto along at its regular gait. The miles slid somewhat jerkily behind him. After what seemed to be a long time, the Three J buildings came into sight. The sound of the pinto's hoofs carried down the wind and

brought a figure to the edge of the porch. It was Jordan. The ranchman turned quickly, waved his arm in a gesture toward the kitchen, and disappeared. A moment later the washroom shutters slammed. Mesquite smiled grimly and then glanced at the bunkhouse. A man had just stepped into sight through the open door, the rifle in his hands halfway to his shoulder. Mesquite thought he caught a quick movement in the blacksmith shop.

The rider slowed the pinto, raised his right hand, and headed straight for the militant cook and the ready rifle.

"You can shoot th' shirt, Dave, after I get out of it, if you want," he called; "but I wouldn't hurt th' hoss."

"--!" said Dave, the rifle slowly lowering.

"George's pinto, but whose shirt? Yeah? That's right: it *is*! What happened to Jed—an' what's th' matter with you?"

"Somebody put a hole through my shoulder," answered Mesquite. "Where's Johnson?" he asked, although he believed that he knew.

"Look behind you," said the cook, grinning.

Mesquite slowly obeyed, and saw the person in question coming out of the blacksmith shop, with his Sharps snuggled under an arm.

"Got you ag'in, huh?" asked Johnson, his eyes on the shirt.

"Yeah; I'm too damn' soft-hearted; but Red won't bother us no more; an' Tommy, too, mebby."

A cold smile slipped across Johnson's face.

"That's good news," he grunted, and waited.

"Saddle up," ordered his foreman. "You can take a pack hoss if you want, 'though I reckon it'll be a nuisance. Light out for Wagon Springs, pronto. I know what th' dynamite's for, an' we're usin' some ourselves. Get a box or half a box, with enough caps an' fuses for a dozen shots. Better bring a box of th' stuff: we might as well do a good job, an' it won't do no harm."

"All right," said Johnson, moving on toward the bunkhouse. He might have been curious, and rightly so, but he asked no questions.

"You better ride around Yucca," said Mesquite, raising his voice.

Johnson nodded his head and went on without pausing.

"Dynamite, huh?" said Dave. "You shore musta found out somethin'."

"I shore did. We can blast just as well as Big John can." He raised his voice again. "Johnson! Stop at th' ranch house, on yore way, for some money."

Johnson came into sight carrying his saddle, and he nodded. He went on toward the corral as Mesquite wheeled to face the ranch house.

The foreman was halfway to the house when he saw the kitchen door open and Jordan step through it and into sight. The shotgun dangled uselessly from one pendent hand. The ranchman stopped at the edge of the porch and waited impatiently, his expression a mixture of surprise, curiosity, and apprehension. On the checkered shirt he could see

bloodstains; and the bandage was gone from his foreman's head.

"Good heavens, Mesquite!" he called. "What's **up?**"

"Been swappin' hosses an' saddles," replied the foreman, grinning. "I'm hopin' to swap back th' saddles."

"You're hurt, man! Been shot again?"

"Yeah, a little," answered Mesquite, slowly getting out of the saddle. He heard hoofs behind him and glanced over his shoulder. "Here comes Johnson, on his way to Wagon Springs. He'll need some money, John."

Jordan plunged a hand into a pocket, drew out a roll of bills, and spread it open. "How much?" he asked.

Mesquite looked at the money, nodded, and held out his hand.

"Give him them first two bills," he said, taking them. "They'll be more'n enough, but he might as well have plenty." He was conscious of a movement in the door, and removed his hat, slipping it under the elbow of his left arm. Johnson drew up beside him, and he gave the puncher the bills. The man was leading no pack horse.

"You keep clear of Yucca, Johnson," he said, "on th' way back. They can't get there in time to bother you, east-bound. They ain't got any hosses. Wonder if I oughta send Dave with you?"

"Any reason for 'em to think that I m makin this ride?" asked the puncher.

"No, there ain't; but they might ride into Yucca later, on a gamble. They're purty well stirred up."

"All right, then. I don't need Dave. I'll miss Yucca, goin' an' comin'."

"That's th' play," said Mesquite, nodding. "Get back as soon as you can. You ever use dynamite?"

"Not none to speak of."

"All right," replied Mesquite, his mind flashing back to a little scene in the bunkhouse. He remembered the stressing of one word in his conversation with Dave and Baker. "Baker out at th' fence, of course?" he asked, knowing that Baker was.

"Yeah."

"All right, Johnson: get agoin', an' make as good time as you can."

They watched the puncher ride away at a good pace, and when he had passed from sight over the top of the little rise the foreman turned his head toward the ranchman; but a swiftly moving figure crossing the porch caught his gaze and held it.

Sarah had had time to study him, to notice everything: the bandage missing from his head, the strange horse, the checkered shirt with its red blotches. The shirt was open at the neck, and strips of toweling showed plainly. She reached the porch edge and stopped, her eyes on his.

"Mesquite!" It was a whisper, vibrant with fear. She stepped down, crossed the few intervening feet, and stopped at his

side, her hand going out to rest on his arm. "You're hurt again!"

"Yeah," he muttered, not daring to move the imprisoned arm. He felt that if he disturbed that hand he would make a fool of himself. He was not weak, not even tired. Energy surged through him, a strange, seething, exultant energy. He inched backwards and found himself against the side of the pinto; but the pinto did not yield.

"Shot?" she asked, agony in her eyes.

"Yeah," he muttered, and then, clearing his throat, spoke louder. "It don't amount to anythin'. Long-range, an' th' bullet was near spent. It was a right good shot, if it wasn't mostly an accident. They were shootin' nearly straight down."

Her hand closed tightly on the sinewy arm and pulled at it.

"Come to your chair," she ordered, almost fiercely. Her voice broke a little, and she looked around at her brother. "Hot water, clean linen, John."

"Reckon you won't have to bother with this one, Miss Sarah," said Mesquite, protestingly, as he somewhat reluctantly followed her to the porch. He felt a little ashamed of himself for allowing himself to be babied; and he felt a little ashamed also, and somewhat alarmed, because he found that he had a sneaking liking for the babying. "Th' Tumblin' L cook took care of me, him an' his damn' hoss liniment. I can feel it yet. Blistered me, I betcha."

Jordan placed the basin of hot water near his sister's hand and stood in front of his foreman, looking down curiously, until Sarah pushed him aside.

“Tumblin’ L cook?” he asked, frowning. “You been over there?”

“Yeah,” answered Mesquite. “Sort of a round trip. I had to. They got my hoss, or rather made me shoot it, an’ I had to take one of theirs. It was down in th’ canyon on th’ north side of th’ cliff. Not knowin’ that country, I had to strike out for th’ Tumblin’ L, so I could cut th’ Yucca trail an’ get home.” He chuckled. “I shore put ’em on foot ag’in, twenty miles from home.”

Sarah decided not to disturb the pads. The work had been well done. She was not familiar with the virtue of horse liniment, but she believed that it was mostly alcohol; what she did not know, or Mesquite, either, was that the liniment had been diluted. Mesquite’s luck still held in that regard, and his thought about blisters was not justified by the facts. The bleeding had stopped, and the wound was so high up that she believed that no body cavity had been pierced. She remembered her school physiology well enough to know that. She buttoned the shirt and stood up, resting her hand lightly on her patient’s forehead. It was moist and cool. Nodding brightly, she gave her attention to the head wound, and after a few moments gave it a final pat and sought her chair.

“Well,” she said, smiling a little, “now you may tell us all about it.”

Dave arose from the wash bench at the sound of the whistling. It was low and melodious and came from the direction of the Yucca trail. There was no moon, but the night was starry bright, and he could see the horse and rider drawing steadily nearer. He knew who it was, but nevertheless his hand did not let loose of the rifle.

"It's me, Johnson," said the rider. "Boss all right?"

"Yeah," said Dave, moving forward. "Sleepin' like a dead man. You get th' stuff?"

"Yeah: thirty pounds—all they had," answered Johnson, stopping near the wash bench. "Here, take this sack, an' put it in th' blacksmith shop, while I unsaddle."

Dave took hold of the gunny sack in the middle, careful not to let the weighted, bulging ends bump together, and carried it gingerly to the building mentioned. He waited for Johnson, and they walked back toward the bunkhouse together.

"If you got any talkin' to do, do it out here," said Dave. "No use wakin' up Mesquite. He needs that sleep."

Johnson felt of his coat pockets.

"I forgot about this stuff," he said. "Caps an' fuses. Wait a shake, till I get rid of 'em." He went off toward the same building and in a few moments was back again. "Mesquite tell you anythin' about what happened out there?" he asked, curiously.

"Yeah; a-plenty," answered Dave, sitting down crosslegged on the sand. "Big John's goin' to be a sick man, right soon. Th' boss is on th' prod."

Johnson sat down beside his companion, and felt for tobacco and papers.

"All right," he said, encouragingly. "Let's hear about it."

CHAPTER XXIII

MESQUITE pushed back his coffee cup, cleared a place for his elbows, and looked at Baker.

"You want to try yore hand with th' dynamite?" he asked, knowing what the answer would be.

"Yeah: I shore do," replied Baker, grinning.

"All right," said the foreman. "We can't make a move between here an' th' hills that won't be seen in daylight. When it gets dark, we start." He said a few words to Johnson and Dave, pushed back the chair, and stood up.

"How you feelin'?" asked the cook.

"All right. Shoulder's stiff an' sore; but no more'n I expected. Reckon that liniment is th' worst of it. He shore poured it on."

"Powerful stuff, liniment," grunted Johnson, feeling for tobacco and papers.

"Yeah, it is," agreed Mesquite. He thought for a moment. "There won't be anythin' for you to do here to-day, Johnson. You better go out to th' fence an' relieve one of th' boys. Knowin' what we do, there ain't no need of worryin' about th' fence; but I want things to go on just like they have been. There ain't no use of settin' that gang to thinkin'. Come back in time for supper. In two, three days we'll run a round-up an' get busy gotchin' slick-ears. There won't be no trouble, then, to hold us back." He swung on his heel and strode toward the door. The showdown was coming, and he was glad of it.

Jordan was shaving when the foreman reached the ranch house, and called out for him to come into the washroom.

Sarah looked up from the breakfast dishes as the foreman stepped into the kitchen, studied his face for a moment, and smiled with satisfaction; but she asked the question, nevertheless:

“How do you feel this morning?”

“Slick. Bang-up,” answered Mesquite with a smile. “Shoulder’s a little stiff an’ sore, but I shore figgered on that.” He moved his arm and shoulder as proof of his words, and then looked toward the washroom, where the scrape of a razor sounded. He saw Jordan wipe the blade and strop it deftly. He envied any man who could strop like that.

“I’m glad,” said Sarah, simply, her eyes for a moment meeting his, as he turned at the words.

“Mesquite, you’re interfering with the smooth functioning of the household duties,” said Jordan, lathering the other cheek. He ceased momentarily as his foreman entered the room. “You must have shaved before breakfast,” he observed.

“Yeah,” replied Mesquite, dropping onto a chair.

“Johnson get back all right?” asked the ranchman, turning to the mirror.

“Yeah, he did,” answered the foreman, crossing his knees.

“Get what he went after?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re as talkative as usual,” commented the ranchman. The razor scratched loudly for a moment.

"After to-day," said Mesquite, diffidently, "you can put th' Number Fours back in th' scatter-gun."

"Yes?" asked Jordan, in surprise. He held the razor away from his face and looked intently at his foreman.

"Yeah."

"How's that?"

"Won't be no more need for it," said Mesquite quietly.

"Good!"

"Miss Sarah can do all th' hossback ridin' she wants."

"Better yet!" exclaimed Jordan. "You just wait till I finish this job, and then we'll all go out on the back porch and sit down."

"All right."

Sarah came to the door, plate in one hand, a dish towel in the other.

"You mean that all this trouble will be over?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," answered Mesquite, arising and facing her. His blood seemed to flow a little faster, and he noticed that her color suddenly deepened. . . . He should have kept on riding; but there would be time enough for that.

She was studying him closely, her face alive with changing expressions. Little wrinkles of worry formed about her eyes and lips.

"You must have worked out some plan," she said, her voice falling a little. His chaps were so dark and slick; the gun

handles so ominous.

“Yes’m, I have,” he replied. “I told you an’ John that I’d put a stop to all this trouble when th’ time came. I know how to do it, now: an’ th’ time’s come. After to-morrow th’ Tumblin’ L won’t bother you no more, th’ fence will be safe, an’ you can ride any place you want to. Two, three days from now, Johnson will start a round-up, throw over every Tumblin’ L animal, an’ begin gotchin’ yore cattle. I’ve had a talk with Johnson.”

Jordan’s shave was not quite as clean as usual, but he wiped off the razor, put it on the shelf, and plunged his face into the basin of warm water. In a moment he hung up the towel and turned.

“All right,” he said. “Let’s adjourn to the porch. You all through in th’ kitchen, Sarah?”

“Not quite; but the work can wait.”

“No need to wait,” said Mesquite, moving toward her. “John an’ I will swap lies until you’ve red up. We got all day for talkin’. Nothin’s goin’ to happen till after dark.”

She stepped back, started to speak, thought better of it, and went back to her tasks.

Jordan seated himself and looked out over the ranch. He saw Johnson mount and ride northward, toward the fence. The cook came out of the bunkhouse and moved lazily toward the blacksmith shop. He came out of that building with a wagon jack and a small, yellow can. The ranchman glanced around curiously, seeking his foreman. Low voices in the kitchen located that person for him, and he looked back at the cook, saw Dave jack up one end of an axle and get busy with a wrench. The wheel slipped off and Dave rolled it a few

feet and stood it against the wagon body. He greased the axle, slipped the wheel back into place, and then critically examined the tire. Something made him shake his head.

Mesquite slowly stepped through the door, moved to the edge of the porch, and stared at the horizon, seeing nothing. Jordan coughed, and the foreman, like a man waking from a deep sleep, turned and looked at him. For a moment the two men exchanged level gazes, and then Mesquite, in reply to the ranchman's slow gesture, moved toward the chair and dropped heavily into it.

"I'll be ridin' on ag'in right soon," he said in a low voice. Its very lack of accent, of expression, told of repression. It seemed dry and hurt.

Jordan fixed his eyes on the distant chuck wagon and the busy cook; but his memory sharply retained the expression on his companion's face.

"I suppose so," he said in a voice as low as the foreman's. "What's Dave doing?"

"Gettin' th' wagon ready for th' round-up," answered Mesquite. "He's doin' it back end first. Those wheels have got to come off ag'in to have th' tires set.

That grease he's puttin' on will catch all th' sand that blows. He'll have to wipe it off an' do it over ag'in." He pushed up to a more erect position. "Oh, well: that's all right. Dave's mebbly wantin' to do somethin' with his hands: it's kinda hard to wait. There'll be plenty of time to do things after tomorrow." He turned his head slowly and looked at Jordan. "Johnson's a right good man," he said, apropos of nothing.

"Yes?"

“Yeah. He can step into Fred’s shoes, all right. A right good man.”

Jordan said nothing, being extremely busy with the proper packing of his pipe. Both men suddenly arose, turning to face the door.

Sarah smiled at them impartially and seated herself comfortably. Her brother knew a forced smile when he saw one, but he said nothing; he did, however, glance swiftly at Mesquite, and saw the same kind of a smile on the man's lean, tanned face. He reached for a match, and as his fingers slipped into the pocket of the vest the motion recalled something to his mind.

"You once told me to go after a match, to go after it *fast*," he said, looking at his foreman. "Remember?"

"Yes," slowly answered Mesquite, nodding. The scene was before him, clear, vivid. He had suggested that Jordan put a gun in the place of the match and make some local history when spring rolled around again.

"When are we going to make the substitution?" asked the ranchman.

"You can let it stay a match, now," answered the foreman. "There's no need to change it."

Sarah was listening closely, with a keen and justified curiosity. She felt baffled, and was yielding to vexation, when the conversation continued and became less cryptic.

"Johnson got thirty pounds of dynamite over in Wagon Springs," said the foreman, abruptly. "It was all they had. Jim Baker knows how to use it, better than I do. We've been wrong about worryin' over th' safety of th' ranch buildin's; but I couldn't help bein' suspicious. Anyhow, I'd rather be

wrong *that* way. Th' Tumblin' L had been prodded enough to do anythin'. They did nothin'. It worried me. They didn't bother th' fence. They didn't hit back. They sent off for that dynamite. But it's all plain, now. Here," he said, leaning down and placing a forefinger on the porch floor. "This is th' layout." He drew a map and explained it tersely. Then he sat up again and looked at Jordan. "That's all there is to it."

Jordan laughed outright, a bark denoting understanding and satisfaction. "Beautiful!" he exclaimed. "Blow their feet right out from in under them, after giving them the first play."

"Yeah," said Mesquite. "That's it: after givin' them th' first play, to make 'em show their hand. Nobody can hardly blame us, after that, can they?"

"No; they can't," replied Jordan. "We're justified, thoroughly justified. Justified in our own minds. Our conscience will be clear. That's the beauty of it. You did well to wait."

Sarah was very thoughtful. She was a highly intelligent person and had understood every word, every gesture in the explaining of the map. After to-morrow everything would be all right: but to-morrow was still a day off, and the interval would be packed with all kinds of possibilities. The very word *dynamite* was a little terrifying, under the circumstances; and there was the threatening human element, in addition. The Tumbling L would not accept such a defeat without a fight. She turned from her brother and looked at the quiet, almost stern man beside him, and then she asked him her everlasting question.

"There will be trouble, of course?"

His gaze did not shift from the distant chuck wagon.

“Yeah, Miss Sarah, there will be,” he answered slowly, but incisively.

“Fighting?” she persisted.

“Yeah; fightin’.”

“But you—you’re in no condition for that!” she said, with spirit.

Her brother glanced at her quickly, and looked quickly away again. That was the way her voice sounded when she was worried about him; the way a woman spoke when she worried about someone dear to her. He glanced at the foreman and saw the frost glittering in the pale blue eyes.

“It’s my left shoulder that’s stiff an’ slow,” he said. “Reckon I’ll go down an’ see what Dave’s doin’ now.” He slowly got out of the chair, remembered to stoop down again for his hat, and nodded to them both as he left the porch.

“I’ll go with you, Mesquite,” said Jordan, getting up quickly.

“Just a moment, John,” said his sister, also arising, her hand quickly going out to his arm. She gripped him tightly.

So they stood, silently watching the foreman stride away. They saw him stop and speak to Dave, pointing to a tire, and then seizing it and shaking it. The rattle reached their ears.

“What is it, Sarah?” asked the ranchman.

She looked up quickly, her lips quivering.

“Oh, John! Let’s give up the water! Let’s sell the ranch-”

“Now, now!” soothed her brother, his arm going around her shoulders. “Everything will be all right to-morrow,” he

assured her.

"To-morrow!" she cried, pushing away from him.

"To-morrow! Oh, if-" She whirled like a flash, darted through the kitchen door, and slammed it after her.

Darkness. The stars winked down. The lamp in the ranch-house kitchen threw its pale, yellow beams in a sash-crossed patch on the porch floor.

At the corral there was shadowy movement. A horse pushed out in vague silhouette. Another followed it. The silhouettes humped up in the middle as the riders gained their saddles. There was aimless movement as the animals cavorted a little. Other shadows pushed back and scattered, and the horses grew more vague, and disappeared. Low voices made a trail of sound from the corral to the bunkhouse. The faint light of its door winked twice as men passed through it, and then streamed out unbroken.

One phrase had carried, clearly and distinctly, to the ranch-house kitchen.

"An' I hope to Gawd Jed's thumb is well!" said Johnson.

The kitchen light went out.

CHAPTER XXIV

BIG JOHN TRUMBULL stood back, looking around to see that his men were far enough away for safety. The nasty little black fuses poked up from their collars of clay, their ends split for easier lighting. The longest fuse was on the east end of the ledge; the shortest, on the west end, and they were graded in length according to their position in relation to these two.

He took matches from his pocket, leaned over, struck one on the rock, and held it against the split fuse. There came a sizzling sputter and a growing wisp of smoke. He moved quickly now, grudging time. Fuse after fuse came to noisy life. Big John, looking nervously behind him, lit the last one and then dashed through the brush to a predetermined shelter.

There was a moment of silence, a hush: and then came a crashing roar of sound, the ripping and splitting of stubborn rock, and a great cloud of smoke. From the bottom of the cliff came heavy crashes as the great pieces of rock ended their flight. The hills played with the roar, passing it to and fro and back again. One of the echoes was decidedly sharp and loud, and smashed against the eardrums of the emerging men.

"Sounds fine!" laughed Big John, his eyes on the riven rock, on the great gap in the ledge, through which the waters of the creek were already pouring. "An' did you hear that *one* echo?" he asked, grinning from ear to ear.

"Yeah; felt like a slap," chuckled Jed Peters. "I'm goin' to take a good look at Jordan's crick, purty soon. It won't be there very long!" He laughed, and glanced around. "An' will you look at that waterfall," he said, going to the edge of the rim and looking down.

The roar of the water was a pleasant sound in all ears, and the Tumbling L outfit stood and watched the curving sheet with an almost hypnotic interest. Smooth and glassy, it slid out into the void.

"Well," said Jed, grinning evilly, "I reckon this pays up for about everythin'. Th' Three J ain't a ranch no more."

Big John's eyes glinted.

“Not quite,” he grunted. “Not quite everythin’, Jed. But we’ll take care of that smart hombre when we get all ready an’ set. There ain’t room for him an’ me both on th’ same range.”

“Yo’re right,” growled Jed, looking down at the bandage on his gun thumb.

“Ain’t shrinkin’ a mite, is it?” anxiously asked Frank, bending over to see better. “Hell! Th’ water’s lowerin’!”

“Naw!” snapped Jed, also leaning over. “She’s run-nin’ just as strong—by Gawd! She *is* shrinkin’! She shore is!”

“Yo’re loco,” said Big John, but he was watching the stream narrowly, his eyes on the top of a stone which had just broken the surface of the water. While he watched, it steadily emerged. One quick glance at the curving sheet going out over the rim of the cliff showed him a smaller, shorter curve. Then the sheet split into two smaller ones, and one of these quit curving and slid down the face of the rock in steadily decreasing volume. Then the second one died out and hugged the rock.

“What you reckon’s th’ matter?” asked the boss of the Tumbling L, staring at his open-mouthed foreman.

“Don’t know,” growled Jed, turning on his heel. “Let’s foller up th’ crick.”

“All right!” grunted his boss. “There’s somethin’ wrong!”

“She’s quit entire,” observed Frank, his eyes on the new bed of the creek. “That blast musta opened up a fault, upstream.”

“Shore!” said the camp cook. “That’s what it done. That was one hell of a blast, lemme tell you.”

“Reckon yo’re right,” said Big John, following Jed.

“If that’s so,” said the foreman, thoughtfully, “we mebbly can fill th’ new fault, an’ fill her up tight. We oughta be able to plug it.”

“Shore!” grunted his companion. He laughed. “Anyhow, we’ve shore plugged up Jordan’s water supply!” He looked back. “You boys wait a little. We’ll be right back.”

They pushed on up the puddly stream bed, skirting its deeper pools, their eyes searching for its secrets far ahead.

“I can still smell that smoke,” said Jed after they had covered nearly half a mile. “Funny how it hangs to th’ ground. There ain’t much wind, an’ that is from th’ wrong direction.”

“Reckon yo’re smellin’ it because yore nose is full of it,” said his companion, sniffing. “It’s in my nose, too.” He laughed significantly. “I like th’ smell!”

They went on as rapidly as the footing would permit, and came to a sharp bend, where thick tree growth crowded down to the edge of the stream.

“Seems like I can smell it plainer as we go along,” growled Jed, complainingly.

“Yeah. That’s because we’re breathin’ harder,” explained Big John. “It’s powerful stuff in more ways than one. By Gawd, I can see it—there, in th’ brush!”

“Yeah, so can I,” grunted Jed without pausing in his stride. “It musta blowed a gust of wind up this way.”

They turned the bend and for a moment stood speechless, staring with unbelieving eyes at the blasted ledge before them. The rushing water seemed to hypnotize them, and the low roar coming up from below sounded ominous.

There was a swift movement on their right, but they did not see it because Jim Baker did not want them to. He was working swiftly around behind them to hold off any of their friends who might be following up the stream bed. And then there was another reason for not sensing his movements. They found themselves staring at a figure which suddenly stepped into sight from behind a clump of brush.

“Like it?” asked Mesquite, one thumb hooked to a gun belt.

Still they stared at him, and Jed’s left hand moved with deliberate slowness toward his right, touched it, and began to pick at the bandage. The soiled cloth dropped to the ground, and it seemed to take the place of the drop of a hat. Big John, understanding everything now, yielded to a sudden burst of rage, and his hand streaked down to his holster. Jed’s right hand moved as swiftly. There came three shots, sounding almost as one. Powder smoke spread out and made a little fog. Mesquite stepped back, dropping the gun into its holster.

Jim Baker squirmed around at the sound of the shots and looked behind him. There was no need for him to think about protecting himself. Mesquite was moving slowly toward the place where they had hidden their horses, and he raised his hand in a beckoning gesture. Jim got to his feet, glanced down the old creek bed, and then turned on his heels and ran back the way he had come. He pushed out past a boulder not far from the ledge and glanced down and back. He stopped, looked intently at something for a moment, and then, nodding emphatically, ran on again. The

ring of iron shoes on rock sounded several times, and then the whispering of the brush died slowly out.

On the ranch-house porch Jordan leaned toward his sister and gripped her arm as a great puff of billowing smoke shot heavenward above the hills. Dave and Johnson stood rigidly before the bunkhouse door. Would the sound never come? There shot up another billow of smoke from a point west of the first. Dave and Johnson leaped for each other and wrestled in their joy. Jordan's grip tightened, but his sister was not conscious of it. There came a roar, a muttering of echoes, and another roar, with the echoes going mad. Dave pushed Johnson from him and jumped to his feet. He waved his hat in the air and shouted something at the ranch house. Johnson's gun was smashing into the sky while he yelled like an Indian.

"He's done it!" shouted Jordan, leaping to his feet. "He's done it, Sis!"

"Yes," said Sarah, staring fixedly at the hills, the nails of her fingers cutting into her palms.

Mesquite and Baker stopped before the bunkhouse door and swung down. They shook hands with the excited cook and his companion, answering the stream of questions as well as they could. Mesquite pushed free and went inside the house. When he came out again he had his blanket roll, and he calmly and quietly fastened it in place on the saddle.

He shook hands with each man in turn, to their utter surprise.

"So-long, boys," he said. "There won't be no more trouble, now."

He smiled at their excited words, shook his head, and sent Thunder toward the ranch house. Here was a job he dreaded.

Jordan met him at the edge of the porch, his eyes on the blanket roll.

"Johnson's a right good man," said Mesquite, his gaze on the ranchman's face. "There won't be no more trouble, John."

"I'm thinking less of that than of what your roll of blankets tells me," said Jordan, slowly. His throat seemed to be bothering him, and he coughed to clear it.

"I've alius told you I'd be ridin' on ag'in," replied Mesquite, trying not to look at the quiet figure in the chair. "I've come for my time, John. I'm rollin' on."

"You mean it, Mesquite?" quietly asked the ranchman.

"Yes, John: I mean it. I'm a tumbleweed."

Jordan dug into his pocket and drew out a roll of bills. He slowly counted off five of them, and held them out to the man in the saddle.

"But that's a full month's pay," protested the rider. "Fifty is about right."

"You were hired by the month," replied Jordan. "I offered you a partnership in the ranch. It still holds good. It will always hold good."

"Well," sighed the rider, trying to smile. "I'll say so-long, John."

"So-long, Mesquite, if it must be. We'll always be glad to have you back with us."

“Yo’re shore white,” muttered Mesquite, and turned to face the woman in the chair. Hopalong Cassidy had been right when he had preached the doctrine of coldness. A thing like this hurt a man like hell.

“I’m sayin’ good-bye, Miss Sarah,” he said, and squared his jaw.

“Good-bye, Mesquite,” she replied, and smiled. In her eyes there was a look he had never seen before, anywhere. They closed for an instant and opened again. “If you ever pass this way again, you must stop and see us.”

“Yes, ma’am. I will.”

“I suppose Jim will tell me what happened up there,” said Jordan, looking at the hills. “Was Big John surprised, or didn’t you see him?”

“I saw him. He was right surprised. Jed’s thumb was plumb well. Jim can tell you about it.” He swung Thunder around. “Well, good-bye, an’ good luck!”

“Same to you, Mesquite!” cried Jordan.

When halfway to the little, distant rise on the trail to Yucca, Mesquite turned in the saddle and looked back. He saw two figures standing on the edge of the porch, and one of them waved a big Stetson. Thunder kept steadily on, climbed the gentle slope, and paused on the crest for an instant in reply to a movement of the reins. The rider looked back again, and saw one figure standing on the porch, the gentle wind pulling at the skirt.

In Yucca, Tim looked up and grinned.

"You look a lot better than you did when you came in here wearin' Jed's shirt," he said.

"Yeah," growled Mesquite. "Tim, this is another time when I *need* a drink. Have one with me, an' then I'll say so-long, an' head on east ag'in."

Tim's mouth opened and his jaw sagged.

"You pullin' stakes outa here?" he asked, incredulously. A hundred a month, and found, and the damn' fool was riding on again!

"Yeah. I'm a tumbleweed," replied Mesquite, trying to smile.

Tim silently took hold of the bottle, poured himself a niggardly drink, and passed the container on to his companion. They drained the glasses and then shook hands.

"Well, so-long, Tim; an' good luck."

"So yo're a tumbleweed, huh?" asked Tim, squinting a little.

"Yeah," grunted Mesquite, and cleared his throat raspily. It must have been the liquor.

"Hell, they don't amount to nothin'," said Tim, looking his companion squarely in the eyes.

"What?"

"Tumbleweeds!"

Mesquite pretended not to understand, shook his head, turned on his heel, and went out. Tim stood where he was and saw the horse pass the window.

At the junction of the two trails, the one leading eastward to Johnny Nelson and his SV ranch; and the one leading westward toward the Three J, Thunder turned, naturally enough, to the west.

“Here!” growled Mesquite, reprovably. “Where you goin?”

Thunder tugged impatiently at the reins and swung into a lope, facing the setting sun. The rider let him go, turning many things over in his mind. Tumbleweeds. Well, Tim was right: they *didn't* amount to anything, and a man could generally trust a horse.

“All right, Thunder!” he cried. “As long as yo’re goin’ west, you might show some speed!”

The keeper of the general store drew back from the window.

“Wonder they don’t kill their hosses, th’ way they ride,” he growled. “Lookit that damn’ fool go!”

THE END



